THE BARON COMES BACK

JOHN CREASEY

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About the Author

John Creasey – Master Storyteller - was born in Surrey, England in 1908 into a poor family in which there were nine children, John Creasey grew up to be a true master story teller and international sensation. His more than 600 crime, mystery and thriller titles have now sold 80 million copies in 25 languages. These include many popular series such as *Gideon of Scotland Yard, The Toff, Dr Palfrey and The Baron*.

Creasey wrote under many pseudonyms, explaining that booksellers had complained he totally dominated the 'C' section in stores. They included:

> *Gordon Ashe, M E Cooke, Norman Deane, Robert Caine Frazer, Patrick Gill, Michael Halliday, Charles Hogarth, Brian Hope, Colin Hughes, Kyle Hunt, Abel Mann, Peter Manton, J J Marric, Richard Martin, Rodney Mattheson, Anthony Morton and Jeremy York.*

Never one to sit still, Creasey had a strong social conscience, and stood for Parliament several times, along with founding the *One Party Alliance* which promoted the idea of government by a coalition of the best minds from across the political spectrum.

He also founded the *British Crime Writers' Association*, which to this day celebrates outstanding crime writing. *The Mystery Writers of America* bestowed upon him the *Edgar Award* for best novel and then in 1969 the ultimate *Grand Master Award*. John Creasey's stories are as compelling today as ever.

Chapter One

Visitor By Night

The front door bell of John Mannering's flat rang sharply.

Mannering stirred in his sleep, then opened his eyes, keeping quite still. Before he had grown accustomed to the gloom the bell rang again.

He pushed back the clothes and groped for his dressing-gown, shivering in the keen night air. The caller rang impatiently for the third time with a note of urgency which found no echo in Mannering's mind.

He pulled his bedroom door to and switched on the light in the lounge. The hands of the clock pointed to nearly three. His irritation and annoyance faded in a quick onrush of anxiety lest the caller heralded trouble or bad news.

'It can't be Lorna.' He spoke audibly. 'She wasn't home until one, nothing can have happened there.' Hearing his own voice did not convince him as he opened the front door.

The door was pushed heavily against him, as a vague figure impelled itself into the room. A hoarse voice implored: 'Shut ze door, zey must not know I am here!' The voice was foreign, reflecting its owner's fear, the man's breathing laboured and heavy.

Mannering closed the door quietly, while the caller moved on to the lounge without a by-your-leave. All Mannering saw of him was a black Homburg hat, a dark coat, and a glimpse of a pale face. He could hear the man's breathing clearly, and waited for a few seconds while his own grew steady.

The visitor was standing in front of the fireplace, his narrow shoulders on a level with the mantelpiece. Sharp, pallid features turned towards Mannering, heavy-lidded eyes gazed at him, wide in alarm and anxiety.

In his right hand he clutched a brief-case.

'Close ze door, please! Zey might see!' The man stopped abruptly, watching each of Mannering's movements closely. He relaxed as the door closed, and pushed back his hat; his forehead was high and pale, except for a red line where the hat had pressed too tightly.

'You are John Mannering?' His clutch on the brief-case tightened, suspicion borne of doubt showed in the watchful eyes.

'Yes, I'm Mannering.' Mannering studied the other more closely, seeing lines of privation and hardship grooving the pallid face, perspiration beading the long, pendulous upper lip and pale forehead. 'I'm wondering whether I should know you,' Mannering went on. He had recovered from surprise but was growing puzzled, more than a little anxious.

'No, no, you do not. It is possible that you 'ave heard of me. Champbourcy, Phillipe Champbourcy, of Paris. Once I had a shop in London but you would not know that. M'sieu Mannering, I call on an urgent matter, my life and that of another is at stake. I appeal to you for help, I implore you to give it. To you it will be nothing, to me all the world. Please!'

A fragmentary memory passed through Mannering's mind of Champbourcy et Cie, Dealers in Precious Stones, Paris. It was a glimpse of years before the war, reminding him how completely the days of peace and their associations had faded. It was a shock to find this man had come to see him about jewels, or because he knew of Mannering's interest in gems. That interest, like many others, had been asleep since Mannering had entered the Army.

'Presuming I'm prepared to help you,' Mannering said, 'how can I, M'sieu?' He was wide awake and wary then, more than a little suspicious.

'I do not ask it for nothing! I offer ten times the money I ask. A thousand pounds, M'sieu Mannering, a thousand pounds for—this!' Champbourcy had been fumbling with the brief-case, pulling it open and extracting a smaller one of Morocco leather. He held it high above his head as if that would encourage

Mannering to approach and reach for it.

Mannering frowned as he returned the man's tense gaze.

'Supposing you're a little less dramatic,' he suggested. 'I'm not used to being called on for a thousand pounds in the middle of the night. What have you there?'

'You need to ask!' exclaimed Champbourcy. 'Come, I will show you. For my manner I offer apologies, M'sieu, I am a hunted man, I know no peace. But I come to talk of this gem of untold value. Ten times what I ask? I joke! Twenty, thirty times ten thousand, and that would not be enough.' His long, sensitive fingers trembled as he fumbled with the catch.

The case opened.

Glittering and scintillating under the electric light was a single pear-shaped diamond. A glimpse made Mannering draw in his breath. Beauty beyond compare winked a multi-coloured fire.

The following silence was broken by the Frenchman's high-pitched: 'I do not lie, M'sieu. For that I ask one thousand pounds, then it is yours, I ask no more except—' He paused, drew back a pace and added: 'Except that you demand no explanations, ask me no questions.'

Mannering said: 'Let me look at it.'

Reluctantly Champbourcy allowed the diamond out of his grasp, wincing as Mannering carried it nearer the light. After a close inspection Mannering's suspicions grew confused; the jewel had gone to his head like strong wine.

Champbourcy demanded harshly: 'You will do it for me?'

'No,' said Mannering thoughtfully. 'I won't buy it, but—'

'M'sieu, do not refuse me! You doubt the honesty of the stone. Give me time and I will prove my right to it, I will sign that I have sold it to you freely and without coercion. There are two others like it, just two others. M'sieu – it is yours for eight hundred pounds! You would not rob me, you would not try to take further advantage of my need.'

Mannering said abruptly: 'I'll lend you a thousand against it as security, Champbourcy. I can't afford to buy it at its value, and I won't take it at a lower figure.'

Champbourcy gasped: ‘You will lend me the money?, Here? Now? M’sieu, I cannot thank you enough. I am on my knees to you! I did not dare to hope of such munificence! But it must be quick, M’sieu, I need the money most urgently. Please, you have it here?’

‘I haven’t a thousand pounds. You can have a hundred and the rest as a cheque, or the lot in cash after ten o’clock in the morning.’ Mannering spoke musingly, eyeing the diamond and not the Frenchman’s eager face.

‘By ten o’clock, M’sieu, it might be in time, but it could be too late. And until I have the money I dare not leave here! M’sieu, you would not trick me?’

Mannering smiled, his firm white teeth showing very white against his browned skin.

‘Would you have come if you’d thought that?’ he countered.

‘No, M’sieu, but … can one always rely on information from those one considers friends?’ A note of melancholy sounded in Champbourcy’s voice, mingling with one of resignation. ‘I am so tired, M’sieu, and so weary. Yet I am divided in my mind. She waits for news from me, the time will pass slowly and agonisingly for her.’

‘Should I know her, too?’ Mannering asked sardonically.

‘M’sieu, it was understood that you should ask no questions. She depends on me, and has my word that I shall help her. But there are times when it appears to need a man more powerful, more capable, than I. If only there was one to whom I could turn, M’sieu.’ He eyed Mannering covertly, unable to keep an eager, almost cunning glint out of his eyes.

Mannering leaned back against a table, thinking that Champbourcy’s concern had been too deep to be wholly assumed. Probably in relaxing his mind had moved from one problem to another, one hope to a second.

Mannering felt at once wary and intrigued, for the other had volunteered no piece of information which might help to explain. His fear for himself and for the unnamed woman was not feigned, although it had been eased by Mannering’s offer.

Mannering put the diamond on a nearby table. He spoke

casually: ‘I might find you a helper if I knew what you wanted.’

‘M’sieu, you think that possible?’

‘It wouldn’t be easy, but there are several men who are looking for gems and would pay a fair price. I could get in touch with them for you.’

‘No, M’sieu, no! You do not comprehend the situation!’

Mannering said sharply: ‘Who sent you to me, Champbourcy? And why?’ The casualness of his manner had gone, the impression of being only half awake. ‘We’ve had enough nonsense, just what do you want?’

‘But M’sieu!’ The Frenchman gaped. ‘I have told you, in the goodness of your heart you have promised to help me.’

‘In the goodness of my heart I’ve promised to lend a thousand pounds on a stone I could sell tomorrow for twenty thousand,’ Mannering said coldly. ‘We’ll call it my good deed for the night. You’ve told me that you’re afraid of being followed, that a woman is in danger, and that you daren’t sell the diamond in the open. What am I to make of that? Why haven’t you been to the police?’

‘M’sieu, we do not understand one another,’ said Champbourcy snatching at a pretence of wounded dignity. ‘It was agreed that you should ask no questions on my assurance that I have every right to the diamond.’

‘Nevertheless I think the police should know about this, for your sake and the woman’s.’

Mannering turned to the telephone, but Champbourcy took four quick steps towards him, gripping his arm and pulling him from the instrument.

‘No, you must not! It would be fatal. You—you would not go to the police, M’sieu Mannering, of all people you are the last to do that!’

Mannering felt a sudden weight of depression on his mind, a quick animosity towards Champbourcy. The hint was too obvious to miss, the inference deep and ominous.

‘And why am I?’ he asked coldly.

‘M’sieu, you do not need to ask that question—’

‘I’m asking it,’ Mannering insisted. ‘I’ve asked you who told

you to come to me, Champbourcy, and I'll have an answer or call the police.'

'It—it was a friend, M'sieu.'

Mannering pulled his arm away and lifted the telephone. Champbourcy drew a long, quivering breath.

'I will tell you, M'sieu! It was Gironde, also of Paris, your very good friend. He has told me that you are the Baron, he advises me that you can be relied upon for all things. Also he told me that you would not wish to hear what he had said, that you would be angry at my knowledge. Remember, please, that you forced me to tell you.'

Mannering said coldly: 'Get this quite clear: I am not the Baron. If you came here expecting me to help you in dealing with stolen gems you've made a big mistake.'

'You—you are not the Baron!' Champbourcy gasped. 'It is incredible, M'sieu, Gironde would not lie to me.'

'He has.' Mannering sat on the arm of a chair, hard-eyed. 'Now let's have the truth, Champbourcy, that you put up that absurd act solely to try to get me interested. I don't believe in your mythical woman and I don't believe you're scared. Moreover, I doubt whether you've any right to the stone. Your story might have appealed to the Baron, it certainly does not interest me.'

About Champbourcy's figure there was a strange dignity, in his voice a note of deeper sincerity.

'I can understand your anger, M'sieu. I am appalled by my mistake. But my story is true. The stone is one of three, the Three Tears of Antoinette. Surely you have heard of them?'

Mannering said: 'I recognised the stone, yes. Durand had the three, in Paris.'

'That is so. This one belonged to Durand, M'sieu Mannering. He is dead, killed because he would not be loyal to Petain, and his authority was too great for him to be left alive. Before he died, M'sieu, he charged me with the mission more important to him than his own life, that of securing the safety of his daughter. It is she who is in danger now, she who authorises me to sell this gem.'

‘Is she in London?’

‘Of course, M’sieu, I come from her. I am afraid that I may have been seen leaving the hotel where she is staying. I was followed, that is an undoubted fact. You see, M’sieu, from France I brought not only Mam’selle Lucille but also much of M’sieu Durand’s Collection. I was helped to smuggle it into the country, and that is a great offence. Now I am told that the price for bringing Mam’selle and myself to England is the Collection, of value almost too great to comprehend. But we are penniless except for the jewels, we have not even the money to pay for the hotel. So it became necessary to sell a piece of the Collection, but’—Champbourcy shrugged his shoulders—‘no jeweller, no merchant, would fail to recognise the pieces, it was necessary to find a man who would buy and not ask questions. Gironde told me that you, the Baron, would be such a man. That is the truth, M’sieu.’

‘What do you plan to do?’ Mannering asked.

‘With money, M’sieu, I believe that I can arrange for Mam’selle Lucille to go to America. She will be safer there. You understand that I have information about a way in which she can travel, of a ship which is leaving for America shortly and on which a passenger will be accepted, with no questions asked. But it is urgent; until she is safely from the country she will be in danger, just as I am. To ask for the protection of the police is to explain that the Durand Collection is in this country, and was smuggled in. And also’—Champbourcy drew a sharp breath—‘I am told that it will be known if I go to the police, that neither myself nor Mam’selle will remain alive for long.’

Mannering frowned. ‘When did you eat last, Champbourcy?’

‘Some hours back.’

‘You’ll feel better after some food,’ Mannering said, ‘and we can talk more. Come into the kitchen, it’s warmer.’

He led the way to the small kitchen of the flat, setting a bewildered Champbourcy to work filling the kettle and lifting cups and saucers from the cupboard, while he cut bread, found cheese and a tin of soup. He heated the latter in a saucepan, watching Champbourcy trying to conceal the eagerness with

which he ate. Little was said until the impromptu meal was nearly over.

'Gironde may have been mistaken about you, M'sieu, in as far as you are not the Baron,' Champbourcy said, 'but he was right in other ways, he told me that I could rely on you for help and kindness. My gratitude is too great for full expression.' He paused. 'But you have been thinking. Tell me of what, please.'

Mannering said: 'I can get you the money for tomorrow, and you could take your chance. I don't advise it. Telling the full story to the police wouldn't lead to serious trouble, and if you had to pay to bring the Collection into the country it wouldn't make a vital difference. You'd have nothing else to fear.'

'But you forget Baptiste, M'sieu.'

'Is Baptiste the man who brought you from France?'

'And who makes his demands, yes. I do not exaggerate, I am terrified of Baptiste, and I speak also for Lucille. He is a powerful man, and indescribably evil. But for him I would agree with you that it would be wise to tell the authorities. But I am not the one who can decide. Mam'selle Lucille must be consulted first.'

Mannering was pouring tea as he said: 'I'd like to see her.'

'You, M'sieu!' The Frenchman started. 'Of course, you wish for confirmation of what I say. I will take you, and—but no, I cannot do that. I cannot return to the hotel tonight. There will be men outside, watching for me, I can evade them, M'sieu, but I must take my time and must not return straight to the hotel. The problem is difficult. I am bewildered and tired, I confess. Will you not take my word?'

'I'm not worrying about your word,' Mannering said mendaciously. 'I'm concerned at a proposed attempt to get out of the country on a faked permit and a dubious ship. You mustn't try it.'

'You think you can dissuade Mam'selle?' Champbourcy shrugged.

'I can try. What hotel is it?'

'The Regal, a large one where it is easy to be lost amongst so many.'

‘What is her room number?’

‘Number 423, M’sieu, and she will open the door to three short knocks and a long one. But I am afraid to leave and return immediately.’

‘I’m thinking of going alone,’ said Mannering.

Champbourcy jumped to his feet. ‘Your kindness excels itself! M’sieu, a thousand thanks! But M’sieu, also a thought. If I was followed then you will be seen leaving this house, they will know that I am here, they will come for me. The diamond will be best with you.’

Mannering smiled grimly. ‘There are eight flats in the house, and they’ll be lucky to find the right one. But if it’ll make you happier, I’ll take it. And I’ll go out the back way. I’d better dress,’ he added briskly, and went to his bedroom with Champbourcy on his heels.

Mannering put the Tear in his pocket, and was dressed in ten minutes. Champbourcy watched him go into the kitchen and switch off the light.

‘You get into bed,’ Mannering said brusquely, and opened the back door.

The keen night air struck at him chillingly. From one of the houses a clock struck the half-hour; it was half-past four.

Mannering’s heart was beating fast; not because of the errand he was attempting, but because of the memories Champbourcy had revived. When the little man had talked of him as the Baron depression had followed and had not yet lifted.

Nearly two years had passed since he had heard the soubriquet.

He went down the fire-escape quickly, turned along an alley at the back of the house and entered Brook Street. There was silence all about him, not even the throb of a car engine or of distant footsteps. He was half-way along the street and almost outside the house where his flat was situated when he saw a figure moving along the sidewalk.

The man went silently, barely discernible against the shadows, then disappeared into the doorway of the house.

Until then Mannering had been contemplating the obvious

risk of allowing a stranger to stay in the flat, but he had taken what money there was out of the safe, and stood to lose little of importance. He had decided, on impulse, to visit Lucille. The day of the Baron had gone, but the mood of the Baron was in him then.

It quickened as the other disappeared.

Chapter Two

Lucille

Mannering walked quickly past, looking neither right nor left, and turned into the doorway of the house adjoining. It was divided into flats, and he opened and closed the door noisily enough for the other to hear. Then he opened it again more cautiously, and returned to the sidewalk.

A second figure moved from the opposite side of the road.

Mannering saw the couple meet outside his house, and heard an unintelligible mutter of conversation. His suspicion of their purpose grew to certainty, and he had no further doubt that Champbourcy had reason to be afraid.

While he waited and watched he heard the slow, clear steps of a policeman's approach. Mannering saw the two shadowy figures back into the house. The steady tramp of the patrolman's feet grew louder.

Mannering waited until he was within a yard of him, then whispered: 'Constable, come here a moment, will you?'

The man stopped abruptly but did not make a sound, taking warning from Mannering's whisper with quick presence of mind.

'Did you call me, sir?'

'Yes,' said Mannering, swiftly and urgently. 'I'm just back from a party and saw a brace of queer johnnies peeping into the next-door window. Might be all right, of course, but it looked damned odd.'

'Which house would it be?' asked the policeman placidly.

'Next door, to the right.'

'Like to come with me and see if they're about?' invited the constable. He paused expectantly, and Mannering said at once: 'I'll be glad to. Mind you, I don't guarantee any prisoners!

‘Just as well to be on the safe side,’ he was assured. ‘We’ll soon see if they’d any business there, sir. That’s the window, is it?’

He was blocking the gateway to the house when the men ran from the porch.

They gave no warning, coming at speed and with arms upraised; Mannering glimpsed a weapon in the hands of one of them. He hooked the policeman’s feet from under him, to save the man from being hit. The would-be assailant fell over the constable’s sprawling body, the other swerved to one side and took to his heels, heedless of his companion’s fate.

The first man regained his feet with the constable trying to clutch his ankle. A savage blow forced the policeman to relax. Mannering turned to help him, but a buffet on the side of the head sent him staggering to one side. His quarry made no attempt to follow up the advantage, but raced in the wake of his companion.

The footsteps faded, two shadows disappeared round the nearest corner.

Mannering helped the policeman to his feet.

‘Strewth, I’d like another crack at them,’ grunted the constable. ‘Ruddy tykes.’ He peered along the deserted street. ‘Wot did you trip me up for?’

‘To save your neck; they weren’t playing.’ Mannering picked up their fallen weapon and swished it through the air. It was a weighted cosh covered with smooth leather, the thicker end filled with lead shot. ‘So I wasn’t far out, constable. Good thing you happened along.’

‘We’ll have them before the day’s out,’ the constable declared roundly if with no apparent reason for confidence. ‘I’d like to know what they were after, wouldn’t I just.’

‘D’you think it might be wise to have the house watched, constable? Until dawn, anyhow. They might have another shot.’

‘Not tonight they won’t,’ said the constable confidently. ‘They was scared off, proper, don’t you worry. But we’ll ‘ave the place watched all right. Now, sir, if you wouldn’t mind giving me your name and address, I’ll be obliged.’

Mannering gave the information and also a brief statement covering what he had seen and, officially, why his suspicions had been aroused.

'Thank you, sir, that'll do very nicely for now. Are you going in right away?'

'I'll stay until you've fetched help, if you think it's necessary.'

'If you wouldn't mind, sir. I'm due to meet my sergeant in five minutes. Won't keep you long, sir.' He hurried off, leaving Mannering with plenty to occupy his mind.

He had little further doubt of Champbourcy's story, and was impatient to see the girl. He was inwardly excited, still affected by the sight of the Tear, knowing that the diamond alone and without the rest of the Durand Collection was a prize for any cracksman, motive enough for any crime.

The policeman and a sergeant arrived ten minutes later.

Before he turned away Mannering saw the sergeant regarding him curiously, and did not think it would be long before higher officials at Scotland Yard learnt that he had been involved in a fracas with several unusual features. His feelings were mixed as he walked sharply to the Regal Hotel; too many people at the Yard would think immediately of the Baron, old scores would be revived, old enmities reopened, if once they heard of the diamond.

The Regal was an ideal setting for Champbourcy's purpose. It was a vast, modern hotel, in which a stranger could stay for a month and still feel that no one knew him or was curious. None there knew the next man's business nor worried about it.

As he reached it, a small army of oldish women were cleaning the foyer, while a tired-eyed clerk surveyed the pseudo-marble pillars and gilt-framed walls with bored indifference.

Ignoring him, Mannering went to a lift which was standing open.

A uniformed lift-girl took him up to the fourth floor, too tired even to look twice at his clean-cut features, square chin, and well-shaped lips. He was just another officer on leave.

Mannering walked rapidly from the lift to Room 423.

He rapped sharply, receiving no answer to the first or second knock but hearing a movement when he tried for the third time.

He rapped again, three short and one long. A girl's voice called: 'What is it? I won't be a minute, Philippe.'

Mannering heard the girl draw back the bolt. Clearly she had no suspicion that it would be anyone but Champbourcy. On seeing Mannering she put a hand to her mouth to stifle an exclamation of surprise.

She was a slim, charming creature, her brown hair tumbling about her.

'I'm from Champbourcy,' he said quickly. 'My name is Mannering. May I come in?'

He expected another exclamation, instead, she backed a pace, staring at him. In the fuller light he saw her wide-set blue eyes, fringed with dark lashes. The poise of her body suggested breeding but her grace was a generous trick of nature's.

Mannering stepped in and closed the door. His smile was genial and reassuring, his words calculated to ease her of any alarm.

'Champbourcy's at my flat, and thought it safer if I came here alone. I am Mannering.'

'Ye-es,' she said at last, 'who else would know where to find me?' She glanced into a mirror and did something to her hair, then looked at him intently. 'Why have you come, Mr. Mannering?'

Her voice was attractive, and her accent so slight that it might have been that of an English girl who had lived for a long time in France.

'To talk about you and Champbourcy, the Tear and your troubles,' Mannering said. 'Supposing you ring the night porter and ask him to send up sandwiches and tea? If you're as hungry as Champbourcy, you'll be ready for a snack.'

'You know that, do you?' she said ruefully, and smiled for the first time. 'He has talked much of you, Mr. Mannering, but as you say, I am hungry.' She stepped to the telephone and gave a brisk order. Only the precision of her words suggested that she was not English. 'Did Champbourcy ask you for the money?'

‘And very effectively,’ said Mannering. ‘I couldn’t refuse, but I wanted to see you. Here are your slippers.’

She thrust her feet into them accepting the slippers as she had accepted the visit, with a poise which amused him yet stirred his admiration. When there was a tap at the door she took the tray and thanked the porter, asking him to close the door for her. Back in the room with the tray on the dressing-table, she said: ‘May I offer you some tea, Mr. Mannering.’

‘I had some with Champbourcy,’ said Mannering, ‘don’t worry about me, you’ve plenty on your mind.’

She said shrewdly: ‘And I think you have something on yours, M’sieu. What do you want us to do before you help us?’

Mannering chuckled. ‘I want the obvious thing, Miss Durand, to discourage you from this hole-and-corner business, and tell the police how you came here. Otherwise you’ll soon be in serious difficulties.’

‘What does that mean?’ There was an edge to her voice.

‘It means that the police will be far more concerned with how you reached the country than with your trinkets.’

‘Trinkets! Did not Champbourcy tell you that—’

‘He certainly did,’ Mannering interrupted. ‘But gems don’t matter with lives at stake. Hadn’t you realised that?’ It was a relief to be able to talk frankly, to be free of the melodrama with which Champbourcy had invested the subject.

‘Baptiste knows you’re here, and wants the Collection,’ Mannering went on. ‘If he doesn’t get it he’ll tell the police that you’re trying to leave the country with the jewels. With a faked permit, or a genuine one for that matter, you won’t be able to do it. You’ve gone quite far enough by getting in illegally. If you try to get out you’ll be considered fair game for the Alien Laws, and an internment camp is the best you can hope for. Now that you’re here, play safe and see the police. They’ll protect you.’

She did not speak for several seconds, and then deliberately poured out a second cup of tea. Slowly, almost contemptuously, she said: ‘You are not what I expected. Gironde told me you would not wish to assist the police.’

‘Gironde mistook me for someone else. I’m not thinking of

the authorities, I'm thinking of you. Is Baptiste your only reason for trying to avoid the police?'

'Of course he is!' Either she grew angry or acted well. 'Why else should I try to leave England? I know it well, I have spent many good years here. If you know him you would not talk so smoothly, Mr. Mannering.'

Mannering smiled. 'He's a Montmartre apache, from what I can gather, finding easy game amongst refugees desperate to escape from France. But if he can smuggle genuine refugees in, he can bring others, you know, and the police need to know about Baptiste. You're to tell them.'

He waited for a sharp refusal and was prepared for a long argument. Instead: 'I had not thought that way,' she said musingly. 'You think he might bring spies?'

'Are you telling me that you hadn't thought of that?'

She coloured slightly.

'I would not let myself, no. I have no wish to hinder Britain, I am as strong for you as my father was. They killed him because of it.' She waved a hand and went on tensely: 'I need not go into the past, Mr. Mannering, it is no help. I will do what you say, but do not mistake me. I shall not feel safe until the police have arrested Baptiste. The thought of him frightens me.'

'You needn't worry about Baptiste,' Mannering assured her easily. 'Where are the jewels?'

'In my valise.'

'Did you bring that from France?'

'Nom d'un nom, no! Champbourcy – Philippe – had them inside a waterproof jacket he was wearing, guarding them with his life. The day will come, I hope, when I can repay him.' She smiled winningly. 'Mr. Mannering, you are puzzled because I am not excited, and appear to be not as worried as Philippe. I take things differently from him, but without him I could not have reached here safely. He even shot a Nazi sentry who had ill designs on me.' She paused. 'Now you come, the Englishman with his inevitable common sense! That is the trouble with you, you believe that everyone has common sense, also. You even believed Hitler had some! How many tragedies would have

been avoided if the English had more imagination and less common sense.'

'Could be,' said Mannering lightly. 'And your story?'

'Mon Dieu, yesterday and last night were not good. We saw Baptiste, we do not know even now if we have evaded him. Was Philippe followed?'

'He wasn't sure,' said Mannering mendaciously. 'In his frame of mind shadows would frighten him.'

'Shadows frighten me,' Lucille said, 'but how can you understand? You British, so good, so solid, but oh, so dull!'

'Let's see the diamonds,' said Mannering dryly, 'they might brighten me up a bit.'

She laughed, almost gaily. 'Philippe had them close to his body all the way through France to the little beach near Deauville. We came away under the nose of the German fools, and were brought to England by night. All the time Baptiste was thinking of getting the jewels, but by an accident Philippe had knocked his only gun overboard and I had a small one. We were fortunate, we lost Baptiste on the beach in Dorset, where we landed.'

'Did you have help there?'

'There was a man Baptiste knew,' Lucille said carelessly. 'It was in the half-light, and there were guards near. Home Guards you call them? They challenged Baptiste, but he was able to get away.'

'A man of resource,' Mannering said thoughtfully. 'You were wrong not to go to the police immediately, Lucille.'

'Please!' She was standing over the valise. 'I know that, but I was frightened. I am trying to repair what I did wrongly. Baptiste remains in England, I have told you we saw him today. No, yesterday.'

From her waist she took a key. As she inserted and turned it he approached her, his heart beating fast at thought of the Durand Collection, a hundred jewels each in its way rare and magnificent as the Tear of Antoinette.

Lucille's slim fingers moved swiftly. She pushed the lid back, feeling for the false bottom.

‘They were packed by Philippe,’ she said, ‘he is an expert, and knew a friend who provided this case without asking for what purpose.’

‘Was this friend in London?’ Mannering asked.

‘Yes, but he is poor, he could not lend us the money.’ She turned swiftly. ‘You’re not beginning to doubt, Mr. Mannering?’

‘I’m not doubting you,’ Mannering said. She had jumped to the inference in his question like lightning. Her eager, searching mind was capable of quick decisions and great stubbornness.

‘A layer of material,’ Lucille said with sudden gaiety, lifting a piece of black cloth, ‘a layer of chamois leather, and then—M’sieu Mannering! They are gone!’

Chapter Three

Empty Case

Lucille uttered the words so swiftly that at first they did not register. Her consternation as she turned to face Mannering told him all that mattered.

'How could it be?' she asked in a strangled voice. 'I saw them there before Philippe went, and no one has been here since. Only you.' She gripped his wrist. 'How did it happen, how did anyone come here without my knowing?' She was shivering violently. 'Who took them, who has them?' Her voice rose, and he put a hand over her lips none too gently.

'We don't want to raise an alarm,' he muttered. 'There's no point in it, they've been gone for an hour at least.'

He took his hand away, relying on her not to make a scene.

'Lucille,' Mannering was abrupt. 'When I tell the police what has happened they might not believe the jewels were ever there. They'll probably think it's a faked story. It sounds like one.'

'Don't be absurd, Philippe packed them, I watched him,' flashed Lucille. 'We counted each piece, wrapped each one. There were seventy-one in all, seventy-one.' She covered her eyes with a hand. 'I cannot believe it has happened.'

Mannering turned to the telephone and asked the operator for Whitehall 1212. The girl stared at him dazedly. The animation had gone from her, but he wondered uneasily whether she was acting; he wanted to trust her, but his better judgment warned him to take the story sceptically.

A precise voice responded at once. 'Scotland Yard, can I help you?'

'Is Chief Inspector Bristow there?' Mannering asked.

'You mean Superintendent Bristow, I expect, sir. He's not in yet, but I can give you his office.'

‘No,’ said Mannering, ‘I want Mr. Bristow.’

‘I can’t give you his private number, sir, I’m sorry.’

Mannering shrugged, and then picked up a telephone directory, finding the number he wanted.

He dialled, then waited for several seconds before a man answered gruffly: ‘Bristow speaking.’

‘Bill, I want you in a hurry,’ said Mannering. ‘Can you come now?’

‘Who’s speaking?’

‘Don’t act the fool, it’s Mannering.’

‘Mannering! Good Lord preserve us, what are you doing in London?’

‘Not prepared to carry on a conversation piece,’ Mannering said, ‘the matter’s urgent. I’m at Room 423 at the Regal Hotel, and I think you’ll need a sergeant … No, no violence, but the mysterious disappearance of jewels during the night … what? … jewels, yes, if that means anything to you … no, I haven’t called the management, I don’t see any point in it yet … good man.’

He rang down, and said to Lucille: ‘He won’t be long.’

‘It won’t make any difference how long he is,’ Lucille said dully. ‘They’ve gone.’

‘Not beyond recall,’ said Mannering briskly. ‘You’d be wise to __’

‘They’ve gone!’ she snapped at him. ‘We brought them through France and across the Channel, now they have gone, Baptiste has them.’ She shivered again. ‘I should have known we could not beat him, we could not manage on our own.’

‘Your present trouble is incipient hysteria,’ said Mannering brusquely. ‘Whether it’s real or assumed I don’t know. If you’ve lost the stones you won’t get them back by rolling your eyes and saying what a fool you’ve been.’

‘What did you say?’ gasped Lucille.

‘The police will be here within half an hour, and from what I know of Bristow he won’t approve of clinging lovelies in peach-coloured dressing-gowns,’ Mannering said. ‘I’m going into the passage for ten minutes. Can you dress in the time?’

‘You beast,’ Lucille said furiously.

‘Ten minutes, not a second more,’ said Mannering.

He closed the door behind him, then strolled along the passage. He was smiling thoughtfully at her abrupt change of manner and the probability that she would spend five minutes refusing to get dressed, the next five hurrying to be ready in time. He pondered the situation, but shied away from trying to get to close grips with facts.

There were too many things he had not yet been told, too many inconsistencies, probably too many lies. In any case it was a matter for the police, not for him. He had forced the couple into the open, ensured a hunt for Baptiste and the smuggling of refugees into England, made reasonably sure that Champbourcy and Lucille would get no more than a severe reprimand from the authorities, and, at worst, a spell in an internment camp.

He was trying to convince himself that he had no further interest and that nothing would make him do anything more than prepare a full report to Bristow. But too many questions slid in and out of his mind.

Primarily, that neither Lucille nor Champbourcy had behaved normally, both giving him the impression that they were acting for effect at least part of the time. Sympathy for them had made him act, that and curiosity to find out whether Champbourcy had really been followed. The police had no reasonable grounds for complaint, and certainly there was no task for the Baron, particularly during ten days’ leave in the course of which he was to be married.

A voice called sharply: ‘Are you there?’

He looked up, seeing Lucille standing in her doorway in a black suit, an outfit designed for a woman with a good figure who wanted to arouse interest and comment. It raised another point to ponder; how had she managed to get it from France? Even Baptiste could hardly arrange for a cabin trunk, and her story suggested that there had been no luggage at all.

‘You said ten minutes, and you’ve been fifteen,’ Lucille told him coldly.

‘I allowed you five for getting over your tantrums.’

Mannering's voice was bland. Lucille tightened her lips.

'Mr. Mannering, you are an insufferable beast,' she said deliberately, 'I do not know why you have taken so much trouble for me.'

'To try to stop two people from making fools of themselves,' answered Mannering. 'But don't worry, Lucille, as soon as the police have taken my statement I shall be too far away to worry you any longer.'

She snapped: 'So you are going to desert me?'

'I'd hate to outstay my welcome.'

'I thought—' began Lucille, then paused before going on scathingly, 'I thought that you were a man who would not be satisfied to leave it to the police. The Baron—'

'That's enough,' said Mannering. 'Gironde apparently told you I was the mythical Baron, but he was wrong. I'm a law-abiding citizen with an interest in jewels, and incidentally a bigger interest in illegal traffic between England and the Continent. Get the Baron idea out of your mind.'

She swung away from him, speaking in disjointed words and phrases, as much to herself as to Mannering.

'So Gironde was right—you—deny you are the Baron. He said—you would. All the same, perhaps you are—wrong. Would you like the police to know—what I think—about you?'

Mannering kept silent.

'I think you will change—your mind,' Lucille went on, taking a lipstick from her bag. She applied it carefully and lightly. 'It could be difficult, could it not? The Baron is badly wanted by the police, they would be delighted to arrest him.' She stared at his bored reflection, then stamping her foot. 'Did you hear what I said?'

Mannering, regarded her thoughtfully. Her eyes were a deep blue, hot and stormy. His were hazel, cool and reflective, faintly amused.

'Don't be childish, Lucille, the police scotched the rumour that I was the Baron years ago, but Gironde apparently didn't learn that.'

'Your police know it is thought?' she gasped.

‘Our police know everything,’ murmured Mannering. ‘They’re wonderful. Haven’t you ever read it in the papers? You’re not good at blackmail, Lucille, even for an amateur, don’t ever try it seriously.’

She was staring at him, trying to judge his sincerity. He returned her gaze calmly; it seemed a long time.

Before either of them spoke again there was a sharp tap on the door.

‘Bristow, I think,’ said Mannering, coming to life. The quickness of his movement to the door startled Lucille. She heard him say: ‘Hallo, Bill, you’re prompt.’

‘Hallo, Mannering.’ Even to her strained ears there was no constraint in the newcomer’s greeting. She saw two hands grip before a grey-clad man entered, saying: ‘Can’t you even have a few days’ leave without calling me out of bed?’

‘Don’t blame me,’ said Mannering, ‘blame the thief or thieves. This is—but just a moment, I haven’t congratulated you yet. How long have you been a super?’

‘Three weeks, thanks,’ said Bristow briefly, and looked past Mannering to Lucille. ‘Mam’selle Lucille Durand, Superintendent Bristow,’ said Mannering, and before Lucille could speak: ‘The trouble’s recent and difficult, Bill. There was a cache of precious stones in that valise some time last night, and it’s not there now. It wasn’t there when I came in,’ he added easily ‘and only Mam’selle Durand has been here, to her knowledge.’

‘What was the value?’ Bristow asked.

To Lucille he was a colourless man, too trim, too good-looking.

‘We-ell,’ said Mannering, pursing his lips, ‘values change. What would you say, Lucille? Half a million?’

Bristow snapped: ‘Half a million what?’

‘Pounds.’

‘Pounds!’

Mannering grinned. ‘Would you say that figure was about right, Lucille?’

‘I would say I have no desire for you to call me Lucille,’ she said coldly, and to Bristow: ‘I cannot be sure. It would not be

less than that.'

Bristow drew a deep breath. 'Now let's be serious, Mannering.'

'I am serious. If Mam'selle Durand is right, and I think she is, she had the Durand Collection with her, or most of it. It came all the way from France, Bill, in a waterproof bag, across the Channel. For some days it's been in England. Then it went by night. That's what you said, isn't it?' His eyes mocked Lucille. 'Would you like to tell the story, or shall I?'

'It amuses you, so proceed,' said Lucille acidly.

Bristow smoothed his moustache, prepared to refute whatever Mannering told him. He listened at first with an expression of acute scepticism, but as the story went on his mood changed and he sat forward on the edge of a chair with startled interest.

Mannering spoke for more than ten minutes. Finally: 'There you have it, Bill, as far as I know it. Lucille and Champbourcy can fill in the details. All you have to do is to find Baptiste.'

Lucille said: 'You tell the story with enchanting detachment, Mr. Mannering, but you omit some essentials. We approached Mr. Mannering, Superintendent, because we had been told by a friend in Paris that he was famous as the Baron. We had no idea that he was so friendly with the English police.'

Bristow smiled grimly.

'Rumours do get around, Mam'selle, if I were you I would pay no attention to them. Mr. Mannering was quite right to advise you to come to us. Why didn't you raise an alarm here, Mannering?'

'There was no point in it. The job was done while Lucille slept so soundly.'

'How could they get in?' Lucille spoke in a high-pitched angry voice, furious because her would-be devastating revelation had been taken so calmly. 'Does everyone have a key here? Is it usual for people to walk in and out of English hotel bedrooms?'

'The chamber-maids have master-keys,' Bristow said sharply. He went to the telephone and asked for the manager.

Mannering listened with his eyes narrowed, ignoring Lucille's restrained but evident anger. As Bristow replaced the receiver, he said sleepily: 'Is there anything else you need from me, Bill?'

'Why? Do you want to go?' Bristow's voice was sharp.

'I'm even eager to,' said Mannering. 'I'm tired, and Champbourcy is waiting at my flat, probably on edge to know what's happened. He'll feel safer now that Baptiste has the jewels: there'll be no grave danger for him or Mam'selle Durand.'

'No, that—' began Lucille, and stopped abruptly.

'That's what?' asked Mannering.

'That is not necessarily so,' Lucille said so swiftly that it hardly seemed an improvisation. 'If you know Baptiste you would realise that he is capable of any crime, he will get his revenge for my approaching the police. It is not safe for me, or for Champbourcy, until you have Baptiste.'

'Don't worry too much about that,' said Bristow. 'We'll look after you.'

Lucille bit her lip, as Bristow went on: 'Tring will be here in a few minutes, Mannering. Wait for him, will you? He'll go along with you to see Champbourcy.'

'Who is Tring?' demanded Lucille.

'He used to be a detective-sergeant,' said Mannering, 'but as promotion is in the air he may, by now, be much, much higher.'

'He's still a sergeant,' said Bristow shortly.

Detective-Sergeant Tring arrived in ten minutes, a tall, gangling, melancholy man who started with surprise at sight of Mannering but made no comment. He received Bristow's instructions, and turned towards the door.

Mannering went with him.

Lucille left her chair, reached Mannering and gripped his arm. There was tension in her manner, in the tight clutch of her fingers.

'Mr. Mannering, are you going to leave it like this? Do you refuse to help me?'

Mannering said: 'Unless there are a lot of things I don't know, the police will be more useful. You haven't played your

cards at all well, Lucille, I'm far more concerned for Champbourcy than for you. If you need help that only I can give, it's yours.'

Lucille regarded Mannering for some seconds, angry, yet unable to conceal a hint of appeal. Then she turned abruptly, releasing his arm.

Tring closed the door.

On the way to Brook Street, Mannering endeavoured to maintain conversation, but without success. Tring, who knew him well, was not disposed to talk of his wife and family, of the war, of changes at Scotland Yard. Tring, in fact, preferred not to talk at all.

'All right, Tanker,' said Mannering, sitting back in the corner of the taxi, 'but at this rate you'll be qualified for a monastery before you get much older.'

'Maybe I would get promoted there,' said Tring with sudden, caustic bitterness, and he lapsed into a silence which lasted until they reached the flat.

Arriving, Mannering waited on the threshold, hearing no sound from any of the rooms. The doors of both bedrooms were ajar, and he imagined that Champbourcy had taken his advice and tried, successfully, to get some sleep. Now he approached the spare-room, Tring close behind him.

It was a habit the sergeant had developed when, as the Baron, Mannering had been active and Tring's sole object in life had been to prove to the satisfaction of a judge and jury that Mannering was the Baron. His failure explained much of his bitterness.

Mannering pushed the door wide open.

He stopped short on the threshold, while Tring uttered a single sharp exclamation. From the head of the bed on which Champbourcy lay, a man was pointing an automatic pistol towards them.

Chapter Four

Baptiste

The name ‘Baptiste’ sprang to Mannering’s mind.

Surprise more than shock or apprehension was his first emotion. The gun meant less than the fact that a stranger was there, and that Champbourcy was making violent efforts to free himself from the cord which tied him to the bed.

The man with the gun stretched out his free left hand and struck Champbourcy over the head. It was a heavy, deliberate blow, making the little Frenchman fall back helplessly. The callous deliberation sent a chill of dislike through Mannering, not relieved by the heavy, ugly features of the gunman.

Tring said in a low voice: ‘I’ll make a run for it, Mr. Mannering, duck when I start.’

‘No,’ said Mannering urgently, ‘don’t do that, Tanker, you won’t make it in time.’

‘What do you say?’ the big man asked. He moved towards the front of the bed, getting closer but not near enough for Mannering to knock the gun from his hand. ‘I tell you – stay where you are.’

Tring swore beneath his breath.

‘We’re staying, Baptiste,’ said Mannering.

The small eyes narrowed. ‘Give it to me,’ the man said laboriously. ‘Then I shall not harm you.’ He paused between each word, as if trying to summon them from a recess in his mind.

‘Give you what?’ asked Mannering.

Baptiste scowled.

‘Give it to me. The jewel.’

Mannering’s heart began to race. Champbourcy had been made to talk, telling the big man that Mannering had the Tear.

He believed that Baptiste was serious when he said that he would not harm them once he had the stone, and he put his hand to his top pocket; the impression that Baptiste was not far removed from a cretin grew stronger.

He said: 'I know when I am beaten, Baptiste. The Tear is a lovely thing, but it isn't mine.' He took the jewel from his pocket and held it up so that beneath the light hundreds of facets shone with fiery brilliance.

'I'll be damned!' exclaimed Tring.

'That is it!' Baptiste spoke eagerly. 'Place it on the bed.'

The glittering fire moved with Mannering's hand. He stepped towards the bed, while Champbourcy began to struggle. This time Baptiste ignored him. Mannering let the stone go slowly, as if reluctant to pass it out of his possession.

In his eagerness Baptiste lowered his gun hand. It was then Mannering went for him. Too late Baptiste realised his error, but before he could fire Mannering gripped his right wrist, forcing the gun towards the floor.

A shot roared out, the echoes clattering about the room, while Mannering and Tring fought with Baptiste.

It was not so much with a man as with a beast whose strength was unleashed. He pushed Tring aside with ridiculous ease, and smashed a heavy blow towards Mannering's face. It might have broken Mannering's jaw had it landed, but Mannering slipped it, putting in a jab to Baptiste's stomach to make the man grunt with unexpected pain. He threw himself at Mannering, carrying the latter to the bed with the sheer weight of his rush.

Tring leapt at the giant's back.

Baptiste made a guttural noise in his throat and shook his great body vigorously, but Tring hung on and Mannering slipped from beneath the brute, then put all the power he knew into a blow to the stomach.

'The gun,' Tring shouted. 'Hit him with the gun!'

It was common sense and the obvious course, but as Mannering picked the automatic from the floor another voice sounded from the door. It was cool and even, almost detached.

‘Don’t do that, Mannering. Let him go.’ Mannering turned abruptly.

The man in the doorway was tall and dark-clad; he wore a handkerchief over his mouth, nose and chin, so that only his eyes showed, and even they were hidden by the shadows of his hat. He too had a gun, covering both Mannering and Tring.

‘Get back against the wall and don’t move,’ the man said. ‘If you’re wise you won’t annoy Baptiste again.’ He advanced slowly into the room, moving towards the Tear which glittered on the carpet.

Baptiste grunted as he pulled himself up, glaring about the room with an ugly light in his eyes. Mannering felt a chill of fear. There was little that was human in Baptiste; his first hazard, that the man was a cretin, seemed unpleasantly near the mark.

‘Baptiste!’ The masked man spoke sharply. ‘Pick up the diamond.’

Cumbrously the cretin did as he was told.

‘Give it to me.’ The newcomer’s voice remained sharp, the only point of interest for Mannering being the fact that it was English.

Baptiste dropped the diamond into the other’s outstretched palm, then he turned to look at Mannering. Tring kept close against the wall, as if in eagerness to go again into the attack. Mannering wondered whether his control over the sergeant would outlast the gunman’s control of Baptiste, who was already on the point of revolt. Mannering gripped Tring’s wrist, knowing that it would be suicidal to make another rush; the stranger would shoot at the first hint of belligerency.

‘Go and see if there is anyone outside, Baptiste.’ The words of sharp command were urgent, but Mannering sensed the other was doubtful of his control; it was not a pleasant realisation. There was a tense pause, before Baptiste, growling beneath his breath, shuffled off.

The masked man spoke: ‘If you’re wise you’ll stay where you are. I don’t want trouble, but if you move I’ll shoot you both.’

Mannering believed him. He watched the gunman as he

backed towards the door. Tring took a step forward, and might have been killed had not Mannering hauled him to one side. For at the same moment the gunman fired.

The door banged behind the two men.

Mannering went swiftly to the kitchen, while Tring, who had a complete disregard for personal danger, rushed to the door. Mannering was more cautious, and doubted the usefulness of following the men openly.

He went out by the fire-escape, hurrying along the passage where he had been once that morning, entering Brook Street as first Baptiste and then the masked man reached it.

Mannering saw the gunman snatch the handkerchief from his face, and caught a glimpse of aquiline features and a high-bridged nose before the man reached a parked car and climbed into it. Baptiste squeezing his bulk into the tonneau. The engine hummed at the first pull at the self-starter.

Mannering drew his Service revolver, without fuss but with deliberation. He aimed for the back tyre. As the car moved his first bullet kicked dust, making small pieces fly from the road immediately behind the car.

The driver swerved so that the second and third bullets went wide.

As he watched, the car disappeared towards Piccadilly.

A uniformed policeman raced towards Mannering with a warden in close support. Mannering approached them leisurely, but his heart was beating fast and his face was flushed.

Baptiste haunted him; for the first time he felt a full sympathy for Lucille, able to believe that the thought of Baptiste could frighten her, that she had not exaggerated her horror of the cretin.

The policeman opened his lips to speak.

‘The number was AX 13,’ Mannering said abruptly, ‘can you get a call out for it quickly?’ The urgency in his voice temporarily robbed the other of words, but before there was any reply or further comment three people spilled out of Mannering’s porch, Tring in the lead.

A fat man with a dressing-gown flapping about his knees and

a tall, angular woman closely-wrapped in some nameless garment followed Tring, talking quickly against each other, pouring out absurd questions. The woman was expressing outrage, indignation, anger, and not a little fear, all set off by the sound of the shots.

Tring, recognised by the constable, gave instructions rapidly, while Mannering did his best to placate the fat man and the angular woman.

There was a confused picture in his mind, not made the clearer by Tring shouting into the telephone, or Champbourcy's lamentations. For half an hour words and questions grated on Mannering's nerves, as he summoned his last reserve of patience to answer them and to get the flat clear. He knew the police had every right to come and search, to take fingerprints and take photographs, but he cursed them inwardly.

Champbourcy, revived with tea laced with whisky, was alternately angry, gesticulating, confused and apologetic. He had been asleep when Baptiste had attacked him, and knew no more than that. No, he had no idea who the second man was. He was desolate, he was afraid for Lucille, Baptiste might now go to her.

'Lucille's all right,' Mannering assured him wearily. 'You both should be, from now on.' He made himself give a résumé of the interview with Lucille, knowing that though Champbourcy approved of it he was not yet disposed to say so.

An hour and a half after he had returned, the flat was empty.

Tring had taken Champbourcy with him for interrogation at Scotland Yard, with Champbourcy mourning the loss of the Tear in high-pitched, anguished tones.

'When he knows the other stuff has gone too,' Mannering thought sleepily, 'he will put up a really good show. Bristow's job to cope, thank the Lord!'

His last thought before falling asleep was that nothing would induce him to revive the Baron, but he was uneasily aware that Lucille and Champbourcy might do that for him, and arouse the suspicions of the police.

Superintendent Bristow approached the Assistant Commissioner's room at Scotland Yard, tapped and waited for a 'Come in' before entering. Sir David Ffoulkes, a spare man with a nearly bald head and wide brow looked up.

'Hallo, Bristow, I had your message, what's the trouble?'

'I don't know where to start, sir,' admitted Bristow frankly. Ffoulkes pushed a writing-pad away from him, and said crisply:

'You'd better sit down. Have you had breakfast?'

'No, but—'

'Then you'd better have a snack here,' said Ffoulkes, lifting the telephone and giving instructions. He replaced the receiver and eyed Bristow with a smile. 'Now let's have it!'

Bristow, obviously giving up an attempt to put his opening words in effective order, spoke bluntly.

'Mannering started it, that's really the trouble. The rest is bad enough, but we could sort that out.'

'Mannering?' Ffoulkes was startled. 'But he's in the Army.'

'That hasn't changed him much,' said Bristow heavily. 'I don't know whether he's been frank or whether he's stringing me along. Have you ever known Mannering mixed up with jewel robberies and not in the thick of it? No, and nor have I.' He paused, while Ffoulkes said nothing although his face betrayed his growing consternation. 'I've a nasty feeling, sir, that Mannering knows more than he pretends. If he's up to his old games again we've got to be quick.'

'Let's have the story,' said Ffoulkes quietly.

'Yes, sir.' Bristow's manner was apologetic. 'I'm talking rather at sixes and sevens, but it's like I feel. What I'd like to know more than anything else,' he added, 'is whether there really was a robbery at the Regal, or whether it's a ruse to put us on the wrong track. But why should Mannering say there was a robbery if there wasn't?'

Ffoulkes waited patiently until he had the full story, then discussed it at length if without effect. Both he and Bristow knew Mannering was the Baron, cracksman extraordinary and Bristow's *bête noire* during the days when the Baron's exploits had earned notoriety on three continents. They had believed

that Mannering had stopped working, but they were prepared to believe that he had started again. Whether for himself or someone else did not matter.

In the forefront of their minds was the possibility that they could do what had evaded them for five years – prove that Mannering was the Baron, and force on him retribution for a hundred sensational coups.

Chapter Five

Robbery Or Not?

Mannering awakened slowly. He stirred, rubbed his eyes, and then stared abruptly at the door.

No one was there, but he remembered who had been, earlier.

He was frowning when he went into the bathroom, ran a tepid bath and took a cold shower after it; surprised to find that it was half-past twelve. He had a luncheon appointment of importance at one o'clock.

'Lorna won't like it,' he mused, 'and I shall have Bristow on the doorstep most of the week. Confound Champbourcy!'

In the foyer of the Hotel Brandt he waited in a secluded corner but could not evade a dozen smiles and waves, and five separate invitations to have a drink.

He refused them all with as much geniality as he could summon and watched the hands of a clock creeping towards one.

Two men in every three were in uniform, and he was surprised at the number of women also in khaki or blue. There was an atmosphere of hustle in the almost sacrosanct Hotel Brandt, far removed from the days of peace. He found it refreshing, and grew more cheerful. If that hotel stirred, the country was really conscious of the increasing demands of war.

At one o'clock precisely the revolving doors turned and a woman stepped into the foyer. She wore a grey suit and a hat with a red feather. To Mannering she put the other women in the shade, and he stepped forward quickly, his gloom quite gone.

They gripped hands.

'Darling, you're on the dot and looking glorious!'

For years Lorna Fauntley had affected him in the same way,

for years the glow which sprang to her grey eyes on sight of him, made his heart beat fast.

Lorna's smile was quick and gay: 'Must we lunch here? We'll be pestered all the time, and we've only nine days left. What about the Debroy grille?'

'That's sheer genius,' Mannering said, 'the tables are so small our knees will have to touch, and everyone talks in whispers anyway.' He heard a man call: 'Lorna, bring him here, we want to know—'

Lorna turned and waved to a youngster in uniform as Mannering pushed through the doors hastily. They stepped into a taxi, which started too suddenly. It tipped Lorna's hat over her eyes.

'Damn,' she said, 'it took me ten minutes to put on.'

'Only ten? You're beating records.'

'Don't be an ass. Is that all right?'

Mannering examined her critically, then leaned forward and kissed the tip of her nose.

'No hat's perfect for you, you shouldn't wear one, but as hats go, that's fine.' He settled back in his corner, knowing that her gaze was faintly puzzled. After a pause, Lorna said quietly: 'What's the matter, John?'

'So the eagle eye is at work again,' said Mannering. 'I did go straight home, as promised, but I've wished a million times since that I'd met a friend and gone on carousal.'

Lorna said slowly: 'John, it's nothing serious? It can't be anything serious this week?'

'It's serious for some,' Mannering said.

The cab stopped before he could say more. Lorna stood without speaking and without smiling as he paid the cabby, remaining silent as he led her into the Debroy grille.

A short, bald-headed man approached.

'A pleasure to see you again, Madame. And you, sir.'

"Thanks, George,' said Mannering, 'is there a corner with room for our knees?'

'One has just been vacated, sir, this way, please.'

'I can't wait a moment longer,' Lorna murmured, 'tell him to

come for the order in ten minutes.'

'If we wait until I've finished it'll be time for tea,' said Mannering. He gave a quick order, then settled down to tell his story, this time omitting nothing. Lorna made no interruptions. Yet Mannering's mind was not altogether on Lucille and Champbourcy; he was thinking of the days when he had been the Baron rampant, and Lorna had been loyal to and beyond a point of danger for herself.

He went through other phases of their association, the fact that for years she had been married to a man she could not divorce but whom she abhorred; and how the husband had been released from prison only three days before being killed in a raid on an east coast town. On that day Mannering had been on the way from London to join his unit, and this was his first leave of more than forty-eight hours since. She had been anticipating it with pent-up eagerness matched in him. For years they had longed and prayed for the day when they could marry.

It was two years since Mannering had donned the baronial cloak, to quote Bristow in a sardonic moment, and neither had believed there could be another joust with the police.

To Lorna, the story he was now telling her must bring an avalanche of disappointment. Mannering wondered how she would react, was even a little apprehensive.

The waiter placed before them a dish of braised mutton, and disappeared.

The corners of Lorna's lips turned upwards in a smile not wholly amused.

'How much do you want to know about Lucille?' she asked.

'No, damn it!' said Mannering. 'It's Bristow's reaction I'm worried about. He'll talk it out with Ffoulkes, and with so many loose ends and glaring inconsistencies they'll probably decide that I'm in it.' He added indifferently: 'As for Lucille, I've done what I can, and that, for me, is the end of it.'

'Don't be an ass,' Lorna said briskly. 'You might put the whole affair out of your mind for a few days, but if you let things stay as they are, you'll be leaving me on Thursday night

to find out how Lucille's getting on.'

On Thursday they were to be married.

'Well, well,' said Mannering, his eyes beginning to crease at the corners, 'it's a point, darling, but—no damn it, I won't think about it. Let's decide that. The Tear was a fake, Champbourcy a dream, Baptiste a nightmare, and Lucille a nymph. How's the trousseau?'

'I haven't bought a thing,' declared Lorna, 'except one or two oddments. And of course, a hat. How did Lucille get her suit, do you think? If you say it was a French cut, it was, a French cut. You make a lot of mistakes, but you don't confuse Molineaux with Maggie Jones.'

'If you're going to be stubborn,' Mannering said, 'you'll probably regret it. I can't see this affair ending inside a week, and it's Monday now. I can put the thing on one side, but I need encouragement. I'd rather not be in Baptiste's arms instead of yours on Thursday. Let's forget it.'

'You can't, you'll only pretend to,' Lorna insisted. 'Look at the questions you'll be asking yourself! Was it a robbery? Were you framed? Where are the jewels?'

Mannering ate in silence for some seconds, then leaned forward and rested a hand on Lorna's arm.

'I haven't let myself think, but you're right enough. Some things *have* popped in and out of my mind. Champbourcy was frightened, and justifiably, I fancy, but he came to me because Gironde, blast him, had named me as the Baron. Imagine the picture Gironde would paint. I'm wealthy, a confirmed jewel-maniac, my eyes would glitter green at the sight of the Tear. Oh, Champbourcy thought he had me just where he wanted, but when I talked of the police he folded up. He agreed too eagerly to my seeing Lucille. Once get me to see this siren, he thought, and her charm would do the rest. The jewels were gone before he came for me, of course, if they were ever at the Regal at all.'

'How much are you guessing?'

'Not much. Lucille did the by-play well, her change of face after discovering the loss was very pretty, but she couldn't keep it up. And she became almost malignant when she saw that I

was serious about the police.'

Lorna wrinkled her nose.

'Are you sure that all they staged it for was to get your interest? You aren't the least bit conceited about it, are you?'

Mannering grunted.

'After Thursday you'll see what I'll do when you make cracks like that. What you mean is, have I jumped to conclusions, precipitously, and erroneously? Possibly, yes. Half an hour with Lucille would clear the matter up. Between us you and I could make her talk.'

'Thanks,' said Lorna dryly. 'I'd love to be at the conference, if Bristow lets her go. What's the law on aliens without credentials?'

'My guess is that they'll let her go and watch her,' said Mannering. 'They'll want to know what I do, too. Why did Champbourcy come to me? If they'd lost the jewels before they called, except for the one Tear, why approach me and not the Yard? Lucille must have lived in England long enough to know that the police are safe recipients of confidences.'

'I'm still waiting to know what you really think,' Lorna told him.

Mannering chuckled, broke off to consult her on the matter of sweets, which they renounced in favour of a cheese savoury.

'What I think,' he said at last, 'is that the jewels were taken some time ago. That Champbourcy thinks the Baron could get them back if he were offered a big enough bribe, because the Baron can do what the police cannot – force entries and put unorthodox ideas into practice. Gironde probably gave me a reputation suggesting that if the prize glitters enough I'll do anything. The Tear glittered, certainly, but there's to be no baronial interference for Bristow's delectation. If he wants it I'll lend him a hand for a couple of days, but no more.'

'And that's your last word?'

'The last is to wish Lucille bon voyage.'

'I know you better than you know yourself,' decided Lorna, 'but while you're still in this mood, what are you going to do this afternoon?'

‘Grant you any wish that money can buy,’ Mannering said grandiloquently, ‘unless you’ve developed expensive tastes. I think—’

He stopped abruptly, and his face hardened.

Lorna looked over her shoulder with quick alarm; then she settled back in her seat resignedly.

Bristow was bearing down on them, his expression filled with foreboding.

He stood four-square at the end of their table, acknowledging Lorna with a brief nod, before saying sharply: ‘Mannering, where’s Lucille Durand?’

Mannering frowned. ‘The last time I saw her you had her with you.’

‘She broke away from me going downstairs,’ Bristow said, ‘and we haven’t been able to pick her up. I’m pretty sure you know where she is, and I mean to find her. I’d like you to come with me.’

His expression did not change on sight of Mannering’s blank countenance, while Lorna began to pull on her gloves.

When the girl whom Mannering had left at the Regal Hotel, hurried out of the swing doors and beckoned a passing taxi, a slim, well-dressed man standing idly by the entrance stepped towards a second taxi, and gave its driver brief instructions.

‘Follow that lady. Ten shillings over your fare if you keep her in sight.’

‘That’s as good as done, sir.’ The cabby slammed the door and started in the wake of the first taxi. Two or three others left the Regal immediately after them, and although Lucille saw theirs she did not suspect that she was being followed. Her driver opened the glass partition. ‘Where to, did you say, please’m?’

‘To Putney, and quickly. At the foot of the hill, I will walk from there.’

The partition closed, and Lucille leaned back exhausted, for the rush from Bristow had been at speed. He could be following her but she refused to look behind her again until she had been

in the cab for ten minutes. The medley of cars and lorries as reassuring. She could see no signs of pursuit, no policemen hurrying, no cause for alarm.

She watched the ceaseless bustle of the West End without really seeing it, looking at the cabby's broad back impatiently. Arriving at the foot of Putney Hill she paid the driver and watched him move off. A second taxi was in sight, but she did not give it another thought.

She walked slowly, as if she were going to an interview which would not be pleasant or reassuring. Half-way up the hill she turned into the drive of a large ill-kept house.

Entering a gloomy and uninviting porch, she pressed a bell-push and waited impatiently.

As footsteps sounded along the hall the slim man moved into a shrubbery from which he could see her.

Lucille did not notice him, as she entered the shadowy hall, stepping past a stout, middle-aged woman, who compressed her lips but said nothing.

'Is he in?' Lucille asked.

'He's been waiting these last three hours.' Lucille ignored the condemnation in the words, and went up the stairs. Heavy oil portraits glowered down on her. Once she looked over her shoulder sharply as if alarmed. The woman had gone, and the hall was empty.

She tapped on a closed door, the sound loud in the silence.

Without warning, the door yawned slowly open.

An old man in smoking jacket and a red fez stared at her with heavy-lidded, blood-shot eyes.

'Why must you try to frighten me?' Her breath was unsteady with the words.

'Frighten you, m'dear, frighten my little girl?' A knuckly hand sawed the air. 'You mustn't get queer ideas into your pretty head, m'dear. That won't do. Come along in.' He pointed to a saddle-back chair. 'Sit down, and don't let me hear any more about being frightened. Bless my soul, I'm a harmless old man, I'm not even stirred by your beauty, m'dear.' He leered at her.

‘You—’ she began, then stopped abruptly.

He said sharply: ‘Something’s the matter. What is it?’

Lucille said: ‘It—it didn’t work.’

The silence in the room was absolute for several seconds, then broke by a harsh exclamation which might have been of anger, fury, or disappointment. The old, lined face worked convulsively.

‘You failed? And Champbourcy ‘

‘I think the police have kept him,’ Lucille said swiftly. ‘Mannering insisted on sending for them, nothing would stop him. You were all wrong about Mannering. He’s not the Baron. The police know him and they’re friendly towards him. It’s not Champbourcy or me who failed, it’s you! You told us he would be frightened of the police!’ She flung the words with a hint of desperation. ‘The police were going to take me to Scotland Yard. I ran away.’

The man snapped: ‘You came straight here?’

‘Yes, but I wasn’t followed.’

‘You little fool!’ he snarled. ‘You’d bring them here, what chance do you think we’ll have if they know I’m helping you? Get out. Get out!’ He hauled himself to his feet. Lucille looked at him in sudden, contemptuous wonder.

‘You’re a harmless old man!’ she cried. ‘Yes, I am just beginning to realise it. A weak, harmless old man, and you are terrified of the police!’ He sank back in his chair, fury and malignancy in his eyes. There was a note of hysteria in Lucille’s voice as she went on: ‘Penrose, I am not frightened of you any longer. You promised me a hundred pounds for trying. Remember? A hundred pounds, whether I succeeded or not. I want it, now.’

‘Get out of my house,’ Penrose said thickly. ‘You’ll get no money from me.’

‘A hundred pounds, now,’ she repeated, ‘or I’ll go straight from here and tell the police everything. That you want me to steal a diamond for you, that you’re looking for the Durand Collection and know how it reached England!’ She grew imperious. ‘The money now! I am not fooling. I will risk what

happens to me.'

Their eyes met; and it was Penrose who looked away first. He muttered under his breath as he turned to his desk, unlocked a drawer and took out an envelope. It was filled with one-pound notes. He counted them slowly.

'Fifty,' he said at last. 'That's all you'll get. If you aren't out of here in two minutes I'll call someone to throw you out.'

She hesitated, then took the notes, slipping them into the neck of her blouse. She did not look round as she ran down the stairs, opened the front door, and slammed it behind her. Half-running, half-walking, she reached the drive gates, turning towards Putney High Street, the slim man who had followed her in a taxi not twenty yards behind.

Quite unaware that she was followed she dived across the road. The slim man, attempting to do the same, was driven back by a line of on-coming traffic. He did not see Lucille boarding a bus heading for the West End.

At Kensington High Street she left the bus and went into Harridges. She was in the shoe department when a man entered, stood watching her from the door, and then quietly advanced.

'Excuse me, Miss. I believe you're going by the name of Lucille Durand?' She started so violently that it was answer enough, and he nodded with satisfaction. 'I must ask you to come with me.' A card was thrust before her, bearing the inscription: Detective J. I. Vine. Scotland Yard.

The slim man telephoned Penrose soon after he had lost Lucille, reporting that the police had certainly not followed the girl to Putney. Penrose was satisfied. He unlocked a drawer in his desk and took out a stiff-covered book, turning to the section marked 'M' he wrote down Mannering's name, adding: 'Is he the Baron? Check available evidence immediately.'

Chapter Six

Meeting At The Yard

Mannering, in an easy chair opposite Sir David Ffoulkes, glanced amusedly at Lorna, sitting beside him, and then at Bristow, who was standing stiffly by the Assistant Commissioner's elbow.

He said: 'I've told you exactly what happened to me last night. I'd never, before then, heard of Lucille Durand, Champbourcy, Baptiste, or the joker with the handkerchief. I'm surprised to learn that the same old bee seems to be buzzing in the same old bonnet.'

Ffoulkes frowned.

'Don't let it amuse you too much.'

'It doesn't,' Mannering assured him. 'But it appeals to my sense of the ridiculous.' He turned to Bristow. 'For the love of Mike, Bill, get that incredibly owlish expression off your face. I'm on leave. I'm going to be married on Thursday. I don't want to know anything more about Lucille. I'm not interested in her jewels, if she had any jewels, and I don't want any Tear of Antoinette. I don't even mind who gets it.'

'I've never known you disinterested in jewels before,' Ffoulkes said grimly.

Mannering smiled sardonically. 'I've never been on the point of getting married before. David, you're a hospitable fellow but I've been here long enough. Resign yourselves to admitting I came into the affair by accident and go out by resolve.'

'I want to know why you doubt the girl's statement as to the time of the theft,' Ffoulkes insisted.

'I'm more interested in why you don't,' Mannering assured him. 'Lucille wasn't convincing, nor was the whole set-up. I know that Champbourcy had one of the Tears, I've told you

before that I think he used it as a bait, being under the same delusion as you. I think he hoped the Baron could help him, and from that it isn't a long step to conceiving that the jewels had been stolen before and he wanted help to get them back. Don't ask me why he didn't want to ask the police, I don't know. The smuggling probably covers it, he would think it a greater crime than it is. Now with your kind permission, Mr. Assistant Commissioner, I'll go.'

Mannering was on his feet when the telephone rang.

Ffoulkes lifted it, and his voice sharpened.

'What's that … you're sure? … yes, and don't be long. Bring her straight to my office.' He replaced the receiver and regarded the others with greater animation. 'I'd like you to stay for another ten minutes, Mannering, you may be able to help us. Lucille Durand has been brought in, she's at Cannon Row now.'

'I thought she wouldn't be free for long,' Bristow said with satisfaction.

'You mean you hoped,' said Mannering.

Ffoulkes turned towards him, 'Let's keep to the point. You're still maintaining that you hadn't seen the girl before this morning?'

'It's still true.'

'You'd never seen her before – a year ago, or five years ago?' Ffoulkes insisted.

'I couldn't guarantee that,' Mannering admitted. 'I might have met her casually, but it isn't likely. She's the type one remembers. What's the new idea, David?'

Ffoulkes said: 'You'll see.'

For the first time Mannering was annoyed, Lorna saw the narrowing of his eyes and the setting of his lips, and felt that he had excuse for annoyance; the attitude of the police was unnecessarily arbitrary, their suspicions that the Baron was active again blinded them to probability. The trouble, Lorna acknowledged, was that probability had been so often set aside by the Baron.

'Had I known how you two were going to act,' Mannering said, 'you'd never have had the first telephone call, and I would

have given Lucille all the help I could myself. I thought she was safer with you, and I thought the same about Champbourcy. In any case if there was undercover business, I didn't want to be mixed up in it, but even that would have been better than this slapstick nonsense.'

There was a tap at the door.

A plain-clothes man entered first. Just behind him was Lucille Durand, and behind her in turn a uniformed policeman.

Ffoulkes looked at the girl coldly.

Lucille, in turn, stared from Ffoulkes to Bristow, then at Mannering.

Ffoulkes said abruptly: 'What is your name?'

Mannering frowned, and his mind began to work swiftly, for the answer to that question could put several puzzling pieces into position. He eyed the girl with deeper interest, and was not altogether surprised when she said: 'Leonora Drake.'

'That's sensible of you,' said Ffoulkes, thawing a little. 'Pretence isn't going to help you, Miss Drake. Sit down, please.' He motioned to Bristow to get her a chair, then went on: 'Now, Miss Drake, you represented yourself to Mr. Mannering and Mr. Bristow as "Lucille Durand". Is that so?'

'Yes.'

'When did you first see Mr. Mannering?'

'This morning.'

'Where did you see him?'

'In my room at the Regal. Why don't you ask him?' She glared at Mannering with a mixture of contempt and anger, but he ignored the glance as he tried to reconcile this fresh news with the rest of the situation.

He did not imagine that Ffoulkes and Bristow would ask many leading questions while he was present. It was quite clear to him that they believed the Baron to be still active, and meant to stop him quickly.

'Just answer my question, please,' said Ffoulkes. 'How long have you known the man calling himself Champbourcy?'

'About a week,' said the girl.

'Where did you meet him?'

‘At the Regal.’

‘How did you meet him?’

She said: ‘You need not ask questions, I will tell you. We both happened to be in the lounge, and started talking. He said he had a collection of jewels and that someone was trying to get them from him, and he needed help. He said I could help him, and suggested that I took the place of Lucille Durand, a woman living in France. The story appealed to me, and I agreed. It may sound incredible, but that is what happened.’

‘So Champbourcy picked you up in the lounge of the Regal?’ said Ffoulkes.

Her cheeks flared.

‘That is a beastly way of putting it!’

‘It’s the right one,’ said Ffoulkes sharply. ‘It might help you to realise in future that contracts of that kind aren’t wise or safe.’ He looked at Mannering. ‘Is there anything else you want here?’ he asked pointedly.

Mannering settled more comfortably in his chair.

‘Heaps,’ he said. ‘I’d like to listen.’

‘Yes, he would like to listen!’ Leonora burst out bitterly. ‘He tricked and cheated me, he pretended he would be able to help me and Champbourcy, then he ran to you. Oh, he will enjoy listening! Why don’t you throw him out?’

Her outburst did not perturb Mannering, but he regarded her with a fresh interest, as if a new, intriguing idea had occurred to him.

‘We’ll look after Mr. Mannering,’ Ffoulkes said sharply. ‘I don’t think there’s anything else I need you for now, Mannering.’

Mannering smiled at him amiably.

‘You started it, I’ll finish it. True, you can fetch your flat-foots to throw me out, but will it be wise? I might ask inconvenient questions. Quite a lot are bubbling up in me already.’ Ffoulkes’ jaw moved a little as if he were trying to restrain his temper.

‘We’re not interested in any form of blackmail, Mannering. Don’t go too far.’

‘If you throw me out, only as far as the *Echo* office with the whole story,’ said Mannering blandly. He pushed his chair back abruptly. ‘We’ll get along, Lorna.’

Ffoulkes coloured, Bristow opened his mouth and closed it again.

Ffoulkes turned to the girl and asked heavily: ‘Have you any objection to Mr. Mannering being present?’

‘No-o,’ conceded Leonora, as if surprised.

‘All right.’ Ffoulkes grew brisk, but Mannering knew that his victory would rankle. ‘As far as I can see, Miss Drake, all you have done against the law is to register at an hotel under an assumed name, and endeavour to hoax the police. Neither need be an offence of any consequence if you’ll be frank with us now. I want you to make a complete statement of what you know about Champbourcy, and the jewels which he claimed to have. If you have played no part in the theft of the jewels you’ve nothing to fear.’

Leonora-Lucille hesitated, then repeated that she had met Champbourcy accidentally at the Regal, and that he had told her that he needed help in the impersonation of Lucille Durand. Champbourcy had said that the jewels had been stolen, and he meant to get them back. He could not go to the police because he had no right to be in England, and in any case they would probably discredit his story. After two or three meetings he had told her that he knew the identity of the Baron, and explained to her that the Baron was a cracksman of great cunning.

‘The Baron would be delighted to hear that,’ murmured Mannering, ‘cunning being as valuable as it is.’

Leonora shrugged, and went on quickly. Champbourcy had planned the scheme after telling her of the man Baptiste. Then she had seen Baptiste, who had followed her and Champbourcy from a restaurant where they had been lunching. The man had frightened her and she had realised that Champbourcy was right when he warned her of danger. But she needed money, and he told her she would get a thousand pounds if she helped and the jewels were recovered. If not, he had one gem which would sell for a good price, and would pay her at least a hundred pounds.

Leonora, telling her story with a convincing directness, spoke again of her fear of Baptiste. Why he continued to follow them she did not know for certain; Champbourcy believed it was because he was afraid they would go to the police, but she suspected it was because the Frenchman wanted to get the big diamond which Champbourcy had mentioned but had not shown her.

Leonora finished rapidly: 'I have been a fool, perhaps, but I needed the money.'

'This all seems very straightforward, Miss Drake, but why are you in need of money?' He asked the question casually, adding: 'There are jobs in plenty if you'd care to take one.'

Leonora said: 'I am on the stage. Good parts are scarce. Also, I needed better clothes, I had to be confident of myself when interviewing managers, and you cannot be sure of yourself on any empty stomach. I have been doing much war work,' she added sharply. 'I was a warden during the air raids.'

Ffoulkes looked at her with surprising geniality, 'All right, Miss Drake, I'll ask you to wait for a little while, but I don't think I need detain you long.' He went to the door, saying to the sergeant who was waiting outside: 'Take Miss Drake to the waiting-room, Vine, and see if there is anything she needs.'

'A picture in a thousand!' exclaimed Mannering, as Ffoulkes closed the door behind them. 'I wouldn't have missed it for a fortune! Driving a coach and four along Whitehall would be very small beer in comparison.'

Ffoulkes snapped: 'I don't want any more from you in that strain, Mannering. Are you satisfied now?'

'That I've been here long enough, yes. Are you?'

'It looks as if you told the truth for once.'

'Not too popular a sport round here. You're in deep waters, David. Leonora-Lucille is only on the surface of them. Take a life-saving jacket with you.'

Bristow opened the door, and Mannering and Lorna went out without speaking again.

Not until they were walking towards the iron gates did Lorna break the silence between them.

‘They’re worried, of course.’

‘The more urgent fact is that we’re going to be worried,’ said Mannering shortly. ‘They kept us there to spring the “Leonora Drake” on us and see how we reacted. What do you think of the girl?’

Loma raised an eyebrow. ‘It’s what she thinks of you.’

‘Not much?’ Mannering grinned. ‘Have I let her down?’

Lorna shrugged. ‘Do you think she was telling the truth?’

‘With several reservations.’

‘Ye-es,’ said Lorna. ‘I wonder if they’ll let her go?’

‘With a shadow, probably. On the surface of it, Champbourcy’s the man they want. What I’d like to know,’ added Mannering, standing on the kerb and frowning into Lorna’s eyes, ‘is where she went from the Regal? She was free for something like three and a half hours, and she was buying clothes at Harridges. Why does she want more clothes? Where did the money come from? Questions lead to more questions.’

‘What are you going to do?’ Lorna asked.

‘I suppose we’d better get some tea, and then go to a show,’ Mannering said, ‘it’s no use worrying too much about the business. If I go deeper it’ll mean more trouble with Ffoulkes and Bristow, and there isn’t much chance of a fully satisfactory ending in the time.’ He smiled. ‘Why the puzzled stare?’

‘I’m thinking about the girl,’ Lorna mused. ‘She isn’t happy.’

‘H’m,’ said Mannering, ‘and what else?’

‘She’s frightened,’ said Lorna crisply. ‘Is it this man Baptiste, or is it the police?’

She stopped abruptly, for Mannering gripped her arm.

‘Look across the road,’ he murmured. ‘You see the big, ungainly man with the walking stick?’

Lorna shivered. ‘I do indeed.’

‘That’s Baptiste,’ said Mannering. ‘Could he be waiting for Leonora-Lucille?’

Chapter Seven

Follow My Leader

Lorna's breathing grew quicker, and she looked straight ahead of her, her stride lengthening. Mannering did not glance at Baptiste openly, but from the corner of his eye saw that the cretin was walking in the opposite direction, slowly and as if he had no purpose. Mannering did not ask himself why Baptiste had come so near to Scotland Yard; Baptiste would do what he was told without question, following his own instincts only when in search of pleasure or revenge.

Mannering doubted whether the man had seen him.

'Who else would he be looking for?' Lorna asked, and grimaced. 'Ugh, what a beast!'

Mannering frowned, 'If he affects you like that how much more must he affect Leonora-Lucille.'

'You can't leave it as it is.' Lorna stopped outside a shop window without seeing anything that was offered for sale. 'I've known from the first that you couldn't. You want to wait for Leonora and follow her, don't you?'

'Yes.' Mannering looked at her, both shamefaced and relieved.

'I'll ring you at Portland Place as soon as I can.' Lorna nodded, then walked quickly towards Trafalgar Square.

It did not occur to him that she would do other than go home, his mind was too busy with Baptiste.

Baptiste had walked as far as Parliament Square, and was now on his way back.

A short, slim man approached him, and there was a brief exchange of words. The cretin nodded slowly, then walked to a stationary bus, boarded it, and was soon carried out of sight.

The slim man, Penrose's employee, replaced him, walking

slowly up and down.

It was nearly twenty minutes to four when the slim man's gait slackened, and he peered across the road.

Leonora-Lucille was coming from Scotland Yard.

Mannering stepped swiftly into the shop doorway as the girl turned towards him. Her quick, nervous footsteps echoed in his ears, while on the other side of the road the slim man hastened to catch up with her.

At a safe distance Mannering followed.

At Trafalgar Square he waited while a man whom he recognised passed him; it was Vine, the detective-sergeant from the Yard, obviously in the wake of Leonora. Mannering smiled as he took the fourth position in the game of follow-my-leader, although in the forefront of his mind was the knowledge that Leonora-Lucille was in no mood to see the situation humorously; fear lurked in her eyes, quickened her step.

She turned into the Strand.

The slim man's trailing was done well, his manner casual and normal. The sergeant's was more obvious.

Abruptly, Leonora turned into a Corner House.

Mannering, knowing that the girl could have chosen no better place for escaping from pursuers, wondered whether after all she did know that she was followed.

He crossed the road.

From the opposite pavement he could see both the front and side entrances; Leonora was noticeable enough for him not to miss her. He lit another cigarette, feeling impatient and a little apprehensive lest he had lost her, and then saw her hurrying in the direction of Charing Cross Station.

Mannering's eyes narrowed. 'Nicely done my sweet,' he murmured, and plunged after her.

He was in the booking hall while she waited in a queue for her ticket, then saw her going on to the Dartford platform.

Waiting until she was out of sight, Mannering followed, entering the first carriage. He watched the barrier, but neither the slim man nor Vine appeared.

The train moved off, and Mannering settled down to wait.

The first stop gave him an opportunity for moving three coaches nearer to the girl. At the next stop he walked along the platform until he caught a glimpse of Leonora sitting in the corner of an otherwise empty carriage her eyes closed.

Mannering opened the door and stepped in.

Leonora opened her eyes, and then turned towards him.

She screamed.

It was on a low-pitched note, and the moving of the train as it started off nearly drowned it. The girl continued to stare at Mannering aghast, her alarm far greater than the encounter justified.

'I'm not as bad as all that,' Mannering said reasonably, sitting down opposite her and smiling with all the friendliness in the world. 'The policeman and the other man who followed you lost you. Tell me, what's frightening you, Lucille?'

'Don't call me Lucille!' she snapped.

'All right, Leonora,' said Mannering, 'but believe me, you're going to hit trouble harder than you'll like if you keep this mystery up.'

'What right have you to follow me?'

'You asked for my help,' Mannering said truthfully.

'And what did you do? You sent for the police and betrayed me!'

'Well, let that pass,' said Mannering. 'If you're going to act like a spoilt brat there's not much point in my staying.' The train was slowing down, but when he glanced out of the window he saw that it was not at a station. He said: 'The police still hold Champbourcy. Have you forgotten that?'

'I have forgotten nothing.'

'Are you going to let him down completely?' Mannering demanded. 'He tried hard to help you.'

She glared at him. 'You know nothing about it.'

'Leonora, I followed you to help you. I've ten days' leave and much to do in the time. If you don't want help, this is your chance to say so. If you do, now's the time to tell me the whole story. Half truths may convince the police, but they don't convince me.'

She said at last: ‘They want to kill me, I have to get away.’

‘Who are “they”?’

‘Baptiste—’

‘Baptiste is a half-wit who does what he’s told,’ Mannering said sharply. ‘You know that as well as I do. Who would tell him to kill you? Are you trying to work up another sensation story?’

‘Oh, you fool!’ exclaimed Leonora.

‘Yes,’ said a voice from the window. ‘A great fool, Captain Mannering, and far too obvious in everything you do. Don’t try to get your gun, please.’

Standing outside, outlined against the window, was a tall, thin man whose face was set and lined, whose eyes were darkened by mascara, whose skin was crudely covered with greasepaint, as if all he wanted to do was to prevent recognition. Levelling his automatic he climbed into the carriage, the sudden movement of the train jerking him to a seat.

The face was unfamiliar and fantastic in its make-up but the voice was that of the man who had taken the Tear of Antoinette, who controlled Baptiste. Mannering had no doubt of that, but said nothing, returning the other’s gaze with one of mild interest. He imagined that this man had taken over from the slim fellow at the station.

‘You will see that I appear just when I’m needed,’ said the man easily, ‘and when least expected. Mannering, I don’t give a damn whether you’re the Baron or not. I’m not interested in you or the Baron, but I am interested in Leonora and no one else – at the moment.’

Leonora sat very stiffly, staring at him.

‘At the next station, which is Dartford,’ said the other companionably, ‘you’ll leave the train, Mannering. There’ll be another back to London soon, and you can take that. Leonora and I have several things we want to discuss, and if she talks sensibly she’ll be all right. Her trouble is that she views ordinary things too dramatically. A born actress indeed, but of course you’ve noticed that, Mannering. Did you hear my

instructions?'

Mannering smiled and stretched his legs.

'I'm wondering whether you and I haven't something in common,' he said. 'Put me right where I go wrong, but aren't you looking for the Durand Collection?'

'Never mind what I'm looking for.' There was an edge to the suave voice. 'You'll do as you're told.'

'You think so?' said Mannering pleasantly. 'Then think again. The chance of you hitting me with a bullet from your pop-gun is no more than one in two. The probability is that I'd have it out of your hand before you can do any real harm. In any case I can bellow, and as we're getting into a station I'll be heard. Your little chat with Leonora will go by the board, and you'll be running for your life again.' He leaned his head against the upholstery behind him as the train drew into the station. 'Get ready, I'm going to shout.'

'Be quiet, you fool!' Urgency sprang into the man's voice. 'Get out while you can, Mannering, take my advice.'

'But for one thing I might,' Mannering said. 'But I saw the Tear, and I liked what I saw. Odd things, gems. I've a mania for them.'

People were walking from the train, others boarding it. Two people looked into the carriage and then walked on. A guard shouted, 'Stand away, please,' and there was another blast of the whistle. The train started with a jolt, and Mannering slid forward, at first as if involuntarily, then with obvious purpose.

He kicked at the other man's ankles, getting the heavy toe of his shoe home, and sliding to the floor.

The sudden pain and the jolting of the carriage sent the man's gun-arm aside, and Mannering, stretching up, was able to get a grip on his wrist. He twisted hard and the gun dropped.

It landed on the seat next to Leonora-Lucille, and she pounced on it. He was not surprised at Leonora's sharp: 'Stop fighting, both of you!'

He released the other and hoisted himself to the seat, regarding the girl without expression. A hint of desperation showed in her eyes, and he could not be sure that she would not

fire.

'You little vixen,' the other man said thinly. 'Give me that gun, or—'

'Stay where you are both of you! I am getting out at the next station, and neither of you will follow me. If you do, I shall shoot!'

'You'll get ten years for it!' snarled the other.

'Never mind what I will get!' The girl was keyed up to a high pitch of nervous tension. Mannering had no doubt at all that she would shoot.

The train slowed down again, and the girl took a chance swiftly, hiding the gun beneath her coat as she stepped to the platform. The painted man started up, but Mannering kept a hand on the door, banging it shut.

'You damned fool, we've got to follow her!'

'I don't think so,' Mannering said. 'We can find Leonora-Lucille later, if we need to. It's time you and I had a talk.'

As he spoke he glanced out of the window. He drew a quick breath and half rose, then subsided again, smiling and rueful, knowing then that Lorna had been far too meek and obliging in Whitehall, and had not intended going home at all. She was walking past the carriage in the wake of the girl.

Mannering knew that he could safely give full attention to the stranger without being too worried for Lorna, for behind her sped Detective-Sergeant Vine. He would be at hand if there was any emergency.

Chapter Eight

Divide The Spoils?

The train moved on.

Mannering put his feet up on the seat alongside his reluctant companion and eyed him contemplatively. Neither spoke for several seconds, and then the other snapped: ‘You’re crazy, Mannering, quite crazy!’

Mannering said: ‘Let’s cut the cackle and get to the horses. I asked you whether you were after the Durand Collection. Are you?’

‘What’s it to you?’

Mannering said easily: ‘It’s this to me. You’ll tell me all you know, or you’ll be marched to Scotland Yard and charged with shooting with intent to harm at my flat this morning. Before that,’ he added, ‘you might get knocked about. I’ve taken a sharp dislike to your methods.’

Mannering made a sudden movement, gripping the other’s right wrist. As the man attempted to use his left hand in support, Mannering caught them both, holding him helpless long enough to insert a hand into his inside coat pocket and draw out a wallet. He released the man and gave him a push which sent him reefing into a corner, and gained a respite long enough to glance at each of three letters. All were hand-written, all were addressed to: Louis Garstang, 11 Bay Court, Kensington.

‘That’s a blow to your anonymity,’ Mannering said. ‘Are you coming across, or is it a visit to the police?’

‘Why are you interested in the Collection?’ Garstang muttered. The manoeuvre had taken away much of his confidence.

‘Because mine could be improved,’ said Mannering.

The change the statement made in Garstang's manner was gradual. A dawning understanding showed in his eyes, incredulity followed, then fuller realisation. He straightened his collar and the set of his shirt.

'Do you mean that?'

'Why do you think I'm so interested in you and the girl?' Mannering asked impatiently.

'Oh,' said Garstang, 'I'm beginning to see what you're after. Yes, I'm looking for the Durand Collection. Listen to me, Mannering.' He leaned forward, suddenly eager. 'I know it's in this country; Champbourcy brought it over. I'm going to get it, but I'll take a cut.'

'In short we'll share the spoils,' said Mannering dryly. 'I thought you'd see it that way if you looked hard enough.'

Garstang said in a slow voice: 'My God, you are the Baron.'

'Let's stick to facts,' Mannering said sharply. 'When did Champbourcy bring the Collection over? Who brought him into this country?'

'Baptiste and several others. They've a route they often take. I get the refugees catered for this end,' Garstang added, and swiftly: 'Once I'm sure they're okay, mind you. I don't risk any fifth-column stuff.'

Mannering made no comment.

'Champbourcy came over with Baptiste,' went on Garstang, 'and the little runt jumped overboard a hundred yards from shore and slipped us. We were waiting to take the Collection off him.' The man was talking confidentially, as one thief to another, and Mannering's dislike grew with every moment. 'I didn't think he'd have the wit to know what we'd brought him over for.'

'Was he alone?'

'He had the girl with him.'

'Leonora?'

'Lord, no, the real Durand girl, Lucille. We've got her,' Garstang added with a high-pitched chuckle. 'She's a hostage in a million. Champbourcy will come to terms before he'll let Baptiste have a go at her.' He leered with indescribable

lewdness. ‘But this Leonora girl knows something. Until the police have finished with Champbourcy she’s our only contact. I wish to hell you hadn’t let her go.’

Mannering eyed the make-up and the grey eyes keenly.

The man’s manner had altered for the worse, the veneer of culture had gone, unless this crudity was the veneer and Louis Garstang was acting a part now.

‘Well, what’s to do?’ Garstang demanded. ‘You ought to be pretty good at this, Mannering. I never expected to meet the Baron!’

‘Don’t be too free with his name,’ Mannering advised, ‘he wouldn’t like it. We’re going back to London,’ he added, ‘and we’ll find Leonora later.’

‘You seem darned sure of yourself.’

‘I am sure.’

Garstang shrugged. There were others behind Garstang, Mannering knew; this conversation would be referred back to his employers.

Mannering was silent for most of the return journey, until reaching Charing Cross and lifting a hand for a taxi. Then, as the taxi pulled towards him, he said: ‘You’re still sure Champbourcy has the other jewels?’

‘That’s a safe bet,’ said Garstang smoothly. ‘Where do I see you again?’

‘You know my address,’ Mannering said. ‘It’s in the phone book. But don’t get too curious, Garstang, I’m interested in the Durand stones and nothing else.’

He nodded curtly, climbed into the taxi, and was driven straight to Brook Street.

It was not until he was entering the doorway of the house that he noticed the other cab pulling up outside. He turned to see Bristow and Tring stepping from it, and was reminded sharply that they might have seen him at the station.

He appeared to notice nothing, however, and was opening his door when Bristow arrived; his manner was obviously placatory, evincing a bonhomie Mannering distrusted.

After a jovial greeting, he said innocently: ‘I thought Miss

Fauntley was with you?'

'She went home,' Mannering said.

Bristow raised an eyebrow.

'Nothing going wrong, I hope.'

Mannering chuckled in spite of himself.

'Bill, you're incredible, your suspicions are as wide open as your naive grey eyes. Where did you see me?'

Bristow smiled a trifle acidly. 'Oh, here and there.'

He was quite at home at the flat, for between him and Mannering there was a liking close to friendship at all times when Bristow was assured that the Baron was quiescent. A shrewd and competent man, he had his blind spots, and Mannering had been constantly successful in finding them.

For the first time since he had seen Champbourcy Mannering felt a thrill of excitement, a sharpening of his old interest in outwitting the police. It went quickly, but left him with a quickened pulse and a fresh eagerness. Thrust and counter-thrust with Bristow had often given him untold excitement, and a hint of it was in his mind then.

Suddenly Bristow said: 'Mannering, are you really interesting yourself in that girl?'

Mannering waved a hand evasively. 'Would it be in order if I repeated your own words, here and there?' he asked with a grin.

'Don't let's fence,' said Bristow, placidly. 'The A.C. was rather on the acid side I know, but I don't think he meant it. You must admit you have given us more than a few shocks in the past.'

'They were asked for. You invited more today.' Bristow's chuckle was much too genial for Mannering's liking. 'I've worked against you often enough to be a pretty fair judge, and I don't imagine you'd take time off just now to interest yourself in Leonora or Champbourcy for their own sake. It wouldn't be wise, you know. I remember the time,' Bristow went on reflectively, 'when we couldn't pull you in because of a technicality.'

Mannering said dryly: 'And if you'd tried for a decade you couldn't have found the evidence, it just didn't exist. But go on.

I'm seeing the light.'

Bristow smiled widely.

'You won't need more than a hint, I know. Things are different now, Mannering. We can detain suspects on a variety of charges which weren't good enough before the war. For instance, there's this talk of Champbourcy coming from France recently. Now anyone who might have helped him, or anyone who knows how he managed it, would be far safer under surveillance, fifth columnists being a public danger.' Bristow smoothed his moustache. 'We don't need a charge for detention on certain offences, we need only suspicion.'

'Yes,' murmured Mannering. '18B and all that.'

'I don't know whether Champbourcy would come under 18B,' Bristow reflected, 'but with a little stretching I think he could. If we thought anyone who was associated with him would be better in gaol for a week or two, we could bring him in, you know. Nothing in the world could get him out until the Home Secretary gave the order.'

'Go on, enjoy yourself while you can,' said Mannering. 'What you're trying to say is, that the Home Secretary wouldn't be moved by the plea that I wanted to get married?'

'Well, would he?' asked Bristow.

'No,' said Mannering sharply. 'And now go back to Ffoulkes and tell him that if he tries to detain me on the pretext that I know how Champbourcy came into the country I'll ring at every back door I know in Whitehall. Tell him I'm going at once to see some friends in the House, a dozen or more, and give them this story verbatim. He'll hear of a question about it being tabled tomorrow or Wednesday. I'm not frightened by his puerile threats but for the first time I'm tempted to take a real interest in Leonora and Champbourcy. That should interest him.'

'Now come, Mannering,' Bristow protested. 'I didn't mean—'

'Go away,' said Mannering hotly. He opened the door and stood by it. 'There's no point in staying.' He eyed Bristow's startled face stonily, and when Bristow began to speak, snapped: 'I've heard enough. We know where we stand, and we'll work from there.'

As the Superintendent's footsteps ceased to echo, Mannering wondered whether he had adopted the right attitude, but on the whole he believed that he had. Bristow's threat to call on Emergency Regulations had angered him more than he knew, but had not unbalanced his judgment. He did not think that Bristow or Ffoulkes would want to invoke the Regulations too freely, but they would probably inquire whether he had carried out his threat to tell M.P.s.

He decided to act swiftly, went out, and took the first taxi that offered. He was at the Houses of Parliament within fifteen minutes, asked for the Right Honourable Glenn Davidson.

Davidson, a junior minister he knew well, was aware of the police suspicious that Mannering was the Baron. He did not know, however, that the police were right, or believe that any friend of his could be the Baron. The idea was absurd. He listened to Mannering's stating of the case, agreed that it was outrageous, and took Mannering to a lounge wherein were a dozen or more M.P.s unfettered by Government positions and mostly eager to ask questions about the misapplication of 18B. Mannering allowed himself to be mollified by their sympathetic attention and vehement assurances that the matter would not be allowed to rest, and left the House confident that Ffoulkes would not use 18B as a lever against him.

He was equally sure that Ffoulkes would take it that the gloves were off.

Returning to the flat, he was in time to take an urgent telephone call from Lorna.

'John, you must get down here at once, I'm at—'

Mannering listened very carefully as she went on.

Later that evening Sir David Ffoulkes was surprised by a visit from a friendly Member of Parliament, and at first was genuinely puzzled. The reason for it dawned on him slowly, but he did not betray his annoyance. It transpired, through much circumlocution, that if Ffoulkes were ill-advised enough to use 18B as a weapon against Mannering, it would undoubtedly be the signal for another outburst in the House.

Ffoulkes declared roundly that he knew nothing about it, but when his visitor had gone telephoned Bristow. Bristow, in much need of sympathy, was being urged by his wife to yet a third whisky and soda. He left it reluctantly.

'Hallo, Bristow,' Ffoulkes said abruptly, 'Mannering has been to the House already.'

A splutter of indignation answered him.

'We shall have to go very carefully,' Ffoulkes went on, 'but you can take it that Mannering's up to no good. What's that?'

'I've a nasty feeling that he *was* in the clear, and that we've pushed him into this,' said Bristow gloomily.

'He doesn't need pushing,' said Ffoulkes sharply. 'Do you know where he is now?'

Bristow gulped. 'No, he slipped Tring all right. He isn't at his flat, and what's more Miss Fauntley isn't at Portland Place. You know that Champbourcy corroborated the Drake girl's story, don't you, sir?'

'Yes,' said Ffoulkes. 'We can't shake either of them. I'd give a lot to know where Mannering is,' he added, and rang off with an abrupt good-bye.

At that moment, Mannering was in fact standing in the moonlit grounds of a country house near Dartford, contemplating the wisdom or otherwise of trying to get in. Also in the grounds were Lorna and Detective Vine, the latter watching Mannering with an eager hope that he was about to catch the Baron in the act of forcing entry. Leonora Drake had been inside the house for several hours.

Chapter Nine

Re-Enter The Baron

Lorna had given Mannering the name of the village where Leonora had gone. Mannering had slipped Tring with comparative ease, and travelled there by hired car. He found Lorna – unaware that Detective-Sergeant Vine's watchful eye was on her – waiting for him in a bus shelter opposite the drive of a large house.

The drive was overhung with shrubs and weeds, the grounds long neglected. Mannering stood watching the house, clearly seen in the moonlight.

He turned away, joining Lorna in a patch of shrubs.

'There's a window on the first floor that I could get up to from the porch.' He said, keeping his voice low. He peered across the moonswept lawn in the hope that the detective would grow bold and reveal himself; he knew that the man was in the grounds, but did not know where. 'The question is whether the girl is staying there of her own free will. Cold, darling?'

'I'm glad I had a woollen jumper,' Lorna said, 'but evasion doesn't deceive me. What are you going to do?'

'If you weren't here I'd take a look inside,' Mannering said, 'after disposing of Bristow's man of course. He's another problem.' He stiffened.

'What's that?'

They waited while the hum of a car drew nearer, then swung into the drive.

Just beyond it they caught a glimpse of Vine skulking from one bush to another nearer the house.

The car drew up, and two men climbed out.

Loma whispered: 'Thank heavens you didn't go in.'

'It's too early to be thankful. What's the time?' He peered at

his wrist-watch. ‘Nearly ten, I wonder how long the callers will be?’

The whine of another car grew audible, that, too, turned into the drive. They heard the front door open and close, then silence descended again.

It was while they were straining their ears lest a third car arrived that they saw a shadowy figure emerge from a side door of the house and walk straight towards them, silent and ghostly over the lawn. Mannering clenched his hands, while Lorna stood with bated breath, both believing that they had been seen.

‘Shall we move?’Lorna whispered.

‘No, stay put.’

The newcomer paused ten yards ahead of them, then disappeared into the shrubbery. They kept quite still, but on the other side of the drive, Vine was incautious enough to move again.

‘He’s after that johnny,’ Mannering said. ‘The question is, “Is that johnny after him?”’

Suddenly there was a cry. A second man hurried from the house. The silence of his movements was uncanny, but what startled them most was the speed of his approach to the shrubs on the other side of the drive.

The moving bushes parted to swallow him up. There was a long pause, then a man backed from the shrubs, and Mannering saw that he was holding a pair of legs. Another pause, and a horizontal body appeared: behind it was a third man.

‘They spotted Bristow’s unfortunate,’ Mannering said softly, ‘and they’ve dealt with him very neatly. We’re at the right shop, darling, and it’s time you went away.’ He heard Lorna’s sharp intake of breath and spoke before she could protest. ‘You can’t stay here, it will be asking for trouble and I mean that. Nip off to the village and knock up the local pub, sweet. Book a room, and if you haven’t heard from me by midnight, telephone the Yard.’

‘But—’ began Lorna.

‘Just tell them that there’s trouble at this house,’ Mannering said. ‘Nothing more. It’s the only thing to do, the only insurance

we've got.'

There was a note of urgency in his voice.

Lorna said: 'John, you've no disguise and you've no tools.'

'I can copy Garstang and use a handkerchief, and that first-floor window will be easy. I'm all right.' He gripped her hand, cheered that she was going to be amenable, kissed her lightly, and, as the two men and their burden went into the side entrance, led the way through the trees and shrubs.

They had entered the grounds by a gap in the hedge, and Mannering found it easily enough.

'Hurry, sweet.'

He waited until she was well away before turning back.

He did not know the bitter-sweet feelings with which Lorna was reflecting that when Mannering was involved in mystery his mind rejected everything – including herself – but that particular problem. Resigned but rueful, she had long come to terms with it.

Mannering did not see it that way, he only knew that his heart was beating faster, that he was obsessed with the need for getting into the house. His identity as Mannering had faded, the Baron had taken over, confident and decisive.

Leonora-Lucille might have gone in willingly or unwillingly; it made no difference. Two people in the house had been watching the grounds and had seen Vine; the two drivers probably, Mannering thought. Vine had been incautious enough to move on their arrival. Intent on keeping the visits secret, they had resorted to violence, and there was no guarantee that Vine would escape alive.

From where he was, Mannering had to cover some twenty yards to the house, taking his chance of being seen.

He moved cautiously in the direction of the porch, a square one with two heavy pillars both of which had bases which would give him a foothold.

Mannering had reached it when he heard a third car.

He stopped, backing swiftly behind one of the stationary cars. The third arrival slowed down, and this time only one man climbed out, then approached the porch.

After a lengthy pause the front door opened. There was a mutter of voices, and then silence. Mannering did not wait, but as he stretched up and gripped a piece of the masonry he looked over his shoulder towards the drive gates. No one was there.

He pulled himself up slowly, feeling the thrill and excitement as the years slipped back.

The top of the porch was roomy, and by standing at its right-hand side he could reach the window he had chosen. It was open a few inches. He stretched out as far as he dared, slowly testing for pressure. There was a loud squeak.

He stopped, breathing quickly, his pulse beating fast.

No other sound followed, no hint that he had been heard. He tried again at a different point, and this time luck was with him. The window opened wide enough to climb through.

His foot slipped.

In that brief moment his heart turned over. Automatically his hands gripped at the sill and his fingers found purchase. Then began a slow patient haul. He knew that if a fourth car turned into the drive then he must be seen, there was no chance of dodging to one side. He clenched his teeth as he went upwards, putting a knee on the sill and then balancing on it.

Slowly he climbed into the room.

Standing silently against the wall, he watched the glimmer of light beneath the door. No footsteps sounded, no hint of any alarm. He drew a deep breath, then took a dark handkerchief from his pocket, tying it over the lower part of his face. Then, after slipping off his shoes and putting one in each pocket, he opened the door.

He found himself in a passage, wide and carpeted, with several doors on either side. He went first towards the landing, noting the layout of the house. An awareness of the probability of danger, of the need for preparing a way of escape, grew insistent.

He saw that the wide staircase lay on the right side of the hall from the front door, and the hall was the shape of a thick L. From it led two room doors, one on either side, the front door and a back entrance. No complicated twists and turns

threatened difficulties.

Two passages led from the landing where he stood. From the middle of the wall between them rose a narrow staircase, the upper treads fading into the gloom of the unlighted second floor.

The carpets were thick enough to risk shoes, and Mannering replaced his own, then, moving quickly, went downstairs. He discovered a third door in the hall, opened it an inch, seeing that it led to the kitchen quarters.

'They won't meet there,' he murmured, and turned to the other doors. Pausing outside each one in turn he listened, but heard no sound, no mutter of voices, nothing to indicate that the house was occupied.

He opened one door cautiously.

The room beyond was empty save for a few oddments of furniture and a close-fitting carpet; the second and third room proved to be the same. Mannering began to feel an eeriness, an uncertainty. This was undoubtedly the house, but clearly no one lived here.

Nevertheless, five men had entered it. Vine, too, injured and unconscious, must be nearby.

'Not to mention Leonora,' murmured the Baron uneasily. 'If I didn't know better I'd say that I was being watched.' He made a closer inspection of the reception rooms, then decided that the meeting place was either on the second floor or in a basement.

He turned to the basement.

'Here goes,' he murmured, the whisper of his own voice giving him little reassurance.

He opened the door leading to the kitchen quarters, passing two small rooms, both dark and empty. A crack of light showed beneath the door of a third.

Stealthily he turned the handle with his left hand, taking his Service automatic from his holster with his right. As the door opened he heard a low-pitched voice, a pause, a clink of glasses, and then very clearly: 'What the hell are we goin' to do with him?'

'Donchew worry,' came the reply, 'the Boss'll look after 'im.

Ruddy dick arst fer it, nosin' arahnd 'ere.'

The other man spoke again, clearly dissatisfied. Inching forward, Mannering was able to see into the room. It was a kitchen with an open range. Over it sat two men, the 'chauffeurs' of the cars, he imagined. A bottle of whisky and two glasses stood on a nearby table.

On the floor lay Vine, his hands and ankles bound, a handkerchief knotted about his neck as a gag. There was an ugly bruise on the side of his head, evidence of the violence with which he had been attacked.

The larger of the two men said irritably: 'There's a heck've a draught, mate, I—'

He half-turned.

'Keep quite still,' the Baron said.

The gun in his hand covered both men, neither of whom exclaimed or moved, although the swarthy face of the smaller man showed sudden fear.

'You,' Mannering said, indicating the smaller man. 'Stand up, and turn your back to me.'

After a momentary pause the man obeyed, and the Baron added harshly: 'Come nearer to me, walking backwards. And don't take chances, I'm not in the mood.'

The swarthy one was a foot in front of him when, with a swift change on the hold of his gun, he brought the butt down sharply on the nape of the man's neck. The husky jumped to his feet, but fear of a bullet overrode his aggression. He stopped.

'Very wise of you,' the Baron said dryly. 'Another move like that and you won't see daylight again. Turn round.'

The man glared but the threat of the automatic was insistent. The Baron went forward.

Suddenly the husky back-heeled.

The Baron slipped the kick as the other turned on one leg, aiming a heavy, wild blow.

Again the Baron slipped it, then brought the muzzle of the gun crack on the husky's temple. He dropped heavily.

The Baron judged that both men would be round within ten minutes. There was no time to search the house further before

making sure that they could cause no immediate harm. The Baron saw that Vine's hands and feet were bound with new cord, went through the pockets of the husky and found the remainder. With this he worked swiftly, tying first their wrists and ankles, then tying the two men together.

That done, he went through their pockets. There was nothing but a couple of letters. He appropriated the envelopes of each and turned to examine Vine.

The man was on the verge of coming round. Mannering was satisfied that he offered no danger, and no great harm threatened him. He unlocked the back door and then went back to the hall and unlocked the front; now two ways of escape were open to him, though he imagined the chief source of danger to be gone.

The quiet in the house was disturbing.

He debated whether to concentrate on trying to find a cellar or to go upstairs, then glanced along the wall beneath the staircase. It was oak-panelled, and there were opportunities in plenty for a concealed door. He examined several panels, then began to run his fingers along the top part of the wood, going systematically from panel to panel. He had no results, but immediately beneath the ledge was a series of carved roses, and he worked at each in turn.

A sharp click startled him.

He smiled tensely as a panel slid back. He took a flashlight from his pocket; the diffused glow shone on a short flight of narrow steps.

He slipped inside, pulling the panel to, but careful not to shut it entirely. Slowly descending the steps he was not surprised to hear the mutter of men's voices.

They grew louder as he approached a door. He pushed it half an inch; the voices remained on a low and unintelligible pitch, and he realised that the door did not open directly on to the room where the men were talking.

He went past it, finding a second door.

He turned the handle, then pushed cautiously, until he could hear every word that was being said by a man whose voice was

low and metallic, a powerful voice unfamiliar to Mannering.

'I don't agree, Netley. Champbourcy isn't necessarily going to be held by the police. They might release him. He's a genuine refugee, with a genuine story. If we are to take advantage of what we've already done, we mustn't back out now.'

The voice held a hint of annoyance, perhaps of contempt; Mannering waited tensely while a second man added testily: 'That's obvious, Netley. Even you can't miss it.'

'I resent that!' Netley had a thin, petulant voice with the hint of a whine. 'Why the devil d'you have to turn everything round on me, Grant? You may think I'm a fool, but I do know what's safe and what isn't. Now Champbourcy's with the police I tell you we're fools to go on with it. I'd rather be safe than have the whole of the blasted Collection.'

The first man spoke quickly; Mannering imagined that he was forcing his patience to its limit.

'We've ample time to get out if it begins to look dangerous, but it's far too early yet. We've got to keep altogether, none of us can go on by ourselves.'

'That's not my view!' snapped Netley.

'You cannot stop now.' The voice startled Mannering, for it was that of Leonora-Lucille.

'I'll thank you to keep quiet,' said Netley waspishly. 'I'm not going on with it for one, you can take that as certain. If you want my opinion you're both fools for not getting out when you can.'

A chair moved sharply.

The Baron waited rigidly, his gun in his hand.

The first speaker said harshly: 'Oh no, Netley, you're not through yet. Grant and I are going on with this, and you're coming with us, or—' he paused deliberately, and Netley gasped: 'Or what? What are you looking at me like that for?'

'We can't afford to let you go about knowing what you do,' said the man with the metallic voice. 'Larramy and West will know how to look after you, and they're upstairs.'

'No!' shouted Netley. 'No! You wouldn't do that, you wouldn't dare. Put that gun away!'

Chapter Ten

Trouble For A Trio

The Baron backed from the door.

Netley's voice rose, one of the other men swore.

Then the door burst open and a tall, thin man tore wildly into the ante-chamber, followed by a thickset man holding a gun.

'I'd put that gun up, if I were you,' the Baron said mildly, covering the second man with his Service revolver. The other's gun was pointing towards the floor and he had no chance to shoot first even if shooting was in his mind.

Behind him Leonora, and the third man whom Mannering took to be Grant, stood aghast.

'Drop that gun,' the Baron insisted.

He kept his voice on a low, unfamiliar note. There was little chance of Leonora recognising it.

The gun dropped.

The thin man turned blood-shot eyes towards the Baron. 'I knew it, I knew it,' he muttered. 'I knew we'd be found out!'

The Baron motioned the two men to go back into the room which they had left. Following them closely, he saw that it was an air-raid shelter, perfectly suited for this furtive conference.

But – conference on what?

Leonora-Lucille was staring at him fixedly.

He wished she would look away, but had no immediate fear that she would be able to identify him. Army clothes were much alike, and of his face she could not possibly see more than his eyes, which were in shadow.

Netley screeched: 'My God, Mortimer, this is your fault, I wouldn't have come but for you, damn you. Damn you, damn you!' He turned towards the thickset man, eyes blazing and

hands trembling.

Swiftly Mortimer struck Netley across the face. The blow was sharp enough to reduce the hysterical outburst to a whimper.

'Now that you're all introduced,' said the Baron sardonically, 'we can go ahead. Larramy and West are out of action for the moment. I regret to say that the policeman you shanghaied is temporarily out too. It is possible that I shall not be the only one to regret it – in the near future, that is.'

'Who are you?' Mortimer asked evenly.

'Oh I'm strictly anonymous,' the Baron said chattily. He glanced towards Leonora, now sitting on the arm of an easy chair; he was growing uneasy about Leonora. 'Now suppose you tell me what all this is about.'

'You don't seriously expect me to tell you?' Mortimer said with perfect composure. Behind him Grant was the only one whom Mannering recognised. He was a diamond-merchant with premises in Hatton Garden.

The Baron said: 'You'll tell me, or you'll tell the police. Suit yourself.'

'You've got to tell him,' whined Netley. 'He can ruin us, ruin all of us. Damn you and your blasted schemes, I wish to God I'd never touched it! We're trying to get the—'

Mortimer took a quick step forward, but Netley, moving hastily to one side, shouted: 'We're trying to get the Durand Collection! We know it's in the country, we want to buy it!'

'Buy it?'

Mortimer shrugged. 'As Netley's said so much I'll tell you the rest.' He had recovered his poise, but Mannering recognised in him a dangerous adversary, the most dangerous of the three – excepting Leonora.

Her eyes were now fixed on him with such intensity that he felt as if the handkerchief had been pulled from his face.

'He won't tell the truth,' Netley shouted. 'The gems have been smuggled into the country and we've got no right to buy them, but he thought we could get them and split them up, and so save duty and taxes. The ruddy fool, he ought to have known better!'

‘And the Durand Collection?’ the Baron inquired suavely.

‘Is a collection of precious stones worth something like half a million pounds,’ Mortimer went on smoothly. Although he spoke casually it was plain that he expected to create considerable effect, and the Baron’s immobility puzzled him, even caused irritation.

‘I’m not in the Marines,’ said the Baron pointedly.

‘What nonsense is this?’ demanded Leonora sharply.

‘The less you say the better,’ Mortimer flung at her, and for the first time Mannering realised that the man had no respect for the girl; that startled him. ‘It sounds a tall story, but it’s true. They’re worth easily half a million.’

‘Well, well, well,’ said Mannering. ‘That’s a hundred and fifty thousand apiece for each of you, and you saw a chance of buying on the side. Who’s selling?’

‘We don’t know.’

‘And then Alice said to the Hatter—’ began Mannering, to be cut short by Netley’s shrill: ‘It’s true! We know they’re in England, we don’t know who’s got them. We were going to buy from a man named Champbourcy but he’s been arrested. I knew it would be dangerous to stay in after that. It’s not safe, I say! I —I’ll give you a thousand pounds, a thousand!’

‘For what?’ Mannering asked.

‘To let me go, you fool. Is it a deal?’

‘With half a million around, no,’ said the Baron.

‘Ah,’ Mortimer spoke suavely, ‘you’re beginning to realise what it means, I don’t know who you are or what you’re doing here, but I’ll make you a far better offer than Netley. Twenty thousand for your silence, if we get the Collection.’

‘What’s the matter with a quarter cut on the Collection?’ the Baron demanded harshly.

‘We’ll talk about it,’ Grant put in quickly. ‘You’d have to earn your cut.’

‘Just how?’

‘We don’t know where the jewels are,’ Grant said. ‘We want to find them. We can buy from Champbourcy, who’s the legal selling-agent.’ Grant paused, then said conversationally: ‘Take

that handkerchief off your face and let's have a look at you. I don't like buying blind.'

'I always sell blind,' Mannering said easily. 'Don't get any wrong ideas about me, any of you, I think first of Number One and the runners-up afterwards if I've time for afters.' His laugh sounded coarse and crude. 'To me it sounds a lot of baloney, I don't particularly believe in the Collection. What's the real racket?'

Mortimer shrugged. 'Please yourself.'

'I'll please myself all right. Put your wallets on the table, all of you.'

Mannering raised his gun a fraction of an inch. Netley, uttering a gasping cry, flung his wallet on the table. Grant followed suit, Mortimer hesitated but then obeyed.

Swiftly Mannering collected the wallets and stuffed them into his pocket.

'That's better,' he said. 'I'll know who you are and where to find you now, if you attempt to double-cross me. With one policeman on the doorstep I don't think it'll be long before others arrive, so this is no place for Sonny Boy.'

'What are you going to do?' Mortimer sounded perturbed for the first time.

'Leave here, pronto,' the Baron said firmly. 'I'm like Netley, nervous. The police won't be more than half an hour; I shouldn't stay that long if I were you.' He backed towards the door, knowing he must see Lorna quickly, or the message would go through to Scotland Yard.

He saw Leonora slip from the arm of the chair.

'You'll be hearing from me,' he said, 'but as a friendly gesture before I go, tell me, who's the girl?'

'She works for Champbourcy,' Mortimer said thin-lipped.

He kept them covered until he reached the door, opened it with his heel, and then took the key from the inside and locked it. It was a flimsy affair, and the three men would be able to break it down with little trouble. He hurried up the stairs; the thudding on the door following him as he entered the main passage.

He slipped into a room opposite, nearly closing the door. The thudding grew heavier.

There was a pause and then a crashing sound followed by the pounding of feet rushing up the basement stairs.

Mortimer entered the hall first, then Netley, Leonora, and Grant.

Netley was crying shrilly: ‘We must know who he is, my wallet could damn me!’

‘He won’t use your wallet,’ Mortimer snapped, and gripped Leonora’s shoulder.

Mannering held his breath.

If Leonora really suspected his identity he imagined that this was the moment when she would say so. There was a tense pause, lasting only a few seconds but to Mannering seeming much longer.

‘Which way are you going?’ Mortimer demanded.

‘I am going alone,’ Leonora said clearly. ‘I will see you again, when I can. Get away now, it is dangerous.’

‘What about West and Larramy?’ Grant asked.

‘Leave them,’ Mortimer said, ‘they don’t know enough to harm us, and we haven’t the time to waste.’ He was walking towards the front door.

Mannering saw him fumbling with the catch.

He stopped abruptly, while Netley gave another high-pitched shriek. For, manipulated from outside, the door opened suddenly.

First Garstang, and then Baptiste, walked into the hall.

Chapter Eleven

Quick Getaway

Mannering's surprise was followed by a quick understanding of what would probably ensue. He did not think that Baptiste would long be free from police surveillance, suspected that wherever he went he would be trailed. Not far from this house the police were probably gathered, and the question of a raid was likely to be governed by the time Baptiste and Garstang stayed inside.

The effect of the sight of Baptiste on the quartet was fantastic. The three men were struck with a fear which Mannering found hard to understand unless they had met him before.

'Just in time, are we?' asked Garstang thinly. 'I thought we might be. Where's the party held, Mortimer? Downstairs?'

So they knew each other; to Mannering a pattern was slowly emerging from the confused events, clear-cut and well defined. One piece after another slipped into place, leaving only two essentials outstanding.

Who had the Collection? And what was Leonora-Lucille's real part in the affair?

He set the thoughts aside.

'Y-yes,' stuttered Netley, 'downstairs, but be careful, there's someone else here!'

'Forget the bluff,' said Garstang. 'Go back.'

Baptiste had moved to Leonora, his eyes, filled with animal lust, fixed on her face. The girl shuddered, and even Mannering felt the hair prickling at the back of his neck.

'Baptiste!' snapped Garstang.

Leonora turned abruptly towards the concealed door. In the dim light her face looked colourless. Mortimer and Grant turned

to follow her, but Netley made a dive for the door. Baptiste shot out a hand.

He buffeted the thin man to one side, so violently that he struck the wall and slid down with a heavy thump.

Leonora was already going down the steps.

Mortimer and Grant followed, as Baptiste picked Netley up by the collar, and dragged him in their wake.

Garstang and Baptiste had their backs to Mannering, as he stepped swiftly forward, his revolver held club fashion.

He used considerable force on Baptiste, yet more on Garstang who half-turned as the cretin collapsed.

But there was no time to lose. Mannering moved quickly to the head of the steps, knowing that precious seconds were slipping, wondering how soon the police would arrive.

He called: 'Mortimer, can you hear me?' Not waiting for an answer he went on: 'Get away while you can, the police are on their tail.'

He hurried through the front door, making for the shadows, as he tried to peer into the moonlit garden.

Mortimer, Netley and Grant came running with the girl just behind them.

As their cars started up, she broke away, running across the ill-kept lawn towards the shrubs, fleet-footed, certain of her direction. Grant swore at her, but his car was the first to move.

Into the glow of his headlights leapt two men, then a third and a fourth, the last two in police uniforms.

Though he had expected the police, Mannering was filled with sharp alarm. The grounds would be surrounded.

He hesitated, then leapt on the running-board of Netley's car, crouching low. It afforded him a fair foothold. Grant kept a hand on his horn, the harsh note blaring through the silence, and went on without stopping.

The police flung themselves to one side at the last moment.

Mortimer went after the leader without hesitating. Netley let in his clutch and followed, so that the three cars roared away in quick succession, giving the police no time to recover. A shot rang out behind them.

Mannering was less worried than surprised that the police used firearms, but there was little time for thought. Netley swung out of the drive and turned towards the village. He was putting on good speed. Mannering gritted his teeth, and hung on.

Then in the distance he saw the moon shining on slate roofs, and knew he was near Engmere village where Lorna was waiting.

He tapped sharply on the glass of the driving window.

Netley glanced round in alarm, and the car swerved across the road. He righted it, but lost speed, his brakes squealing as he was forced to pull up.

Mannering jumped off the running-board.

So many things crowded his mind that he was not aware at first of the opening of the inn door, and the two figures hurrying across the road to Netley's car. Then he recognised one of them. It was Bristow.

Mannering edged deeper into the shadows. As he did so a half-seen figure moved alongside him.

He clenched his fist ready for attack, but as he swung round, Lorna put a hand on his arm.

He drew her against the inn wall. The shadows there were deep and dark, they were safe from observation. By then Netley's car was some way along the road, moving at speed, Bristow and his man in hot pursuit.

Neither Mannering nor Lorna moved until the pursuing car was a hundred yards away. Then they crept forward cautiously.

The door of the inn was now closed, allowing Lorna and Mannering a greater freedom, and for the first time since he had left the house Mannering smiled.

But there was urgency in his voice.

'Did Bristow see you?'

'No, I heard him come and slipped out here.'

'Bless you, but you had me scared.' He was silent for a moment, but his restless mind was soon working out ways and means.

'I don't fancy a long walk,' he said meditatively, 'and we

can't hire a car at this time of night, Bristow would know all about it before morning. How far's Dartford, do you know?'

'Two miles,' said Lorna, 'but you needn't worry about that. There's a halt on the line here, and the last London train always stops. We can pay at the other end.'

Mannering gave her a brief hug.

'You're far too efficient. Which way to the halt?'

In less than five minutes they were climbing a flight of steps to the station platform where several other people were waiting. A couple were leaning against a wooden rail, lost to all but themselves.

'An example to follow,' Mannering commented softly, and put an arm about Lorna's shoulder. 'Darling,' he said, 'I love you.'

'You're an impossible fool,' said Lorna, but there was laughter in her voice. 'Was everything all right? You haven't been recognised?'

Mannering's expression altered.

'It is possible that Leonora-Lucille might have recognised me. A strange girl, that. If she believes I was at the house, and Bristow talks to her, she won't be long in expressing opinions.'

'Could she be sure?'

'No-o,' said Mannering, but he sounded worried. 'No, she could only jump to conclusions, but if she does, Bristow will be on the warpath faster than ever. I hope she got away.'

'You don't sound hopeful.'

'I'm not,' admitted Mannering. 'There's no use blinking at the fact that she's the weak spot in the programme.'

'One way and the other we're in a fine mess,' Lorna said wearily. Perhaps I oughtn't to have persuaded you into it.'

'I didn't need persuading,' Mannering said, 'only the barest approval. Here's our train.'

There was a general stir on the platform. Doors banged, and a guard exhorted passengers to hurry. Mannering and Lorna climbed into an ill-lighted compartment, in which all the corner seats were taken.

At Dartford two people left the carriage but four or five

entered, three standing unsteadily.

The stops seemed interminable, but a stir in the compartment awakened Mannering at last to the knowledge that they were approaching Charing Cross.

In the general melée of arrival there was little chance that they would be seen, even if the station were watched. They went into the hotel adjoining the station, then out into the semi-darkness of the Strand. Here they entered an all-night restaurant where they were unlikely to be noticed, and even less likely to be known.

As they ate, Mannering related what he could of the events of the evening and the night. Although robbed of effect by his matter-offactness the highlights were inescapable, the risks he had run obvious enough to make Lorna alarmed. Nevertheless, she said quietly: 'Can you make anything out of it?'

Mannering nodded. 'Results aplenty for the police. That should keep them happy. They must have apprehended Garstang and Baptiste, as well as Larramy and West. They've also rescued Vine from almost certain death. The only danger for us, my sweet, is Leonora-Lucille.'

'You don't know where to find her?'

'No, but one of the trio at the house might,' said Mannering, 'we've a chance there.' He finished his coffee and picked up the bill. 'We needn't worry about it now, anyhow, she can't give Bristow proof and I don't think he'll try to work without it, 18B or not.' He chuckled.

Moving out into the clear moonlight, they were lucky enough to find a taxi.

As they settled down, Mannering, glancing through the window at the back, saw another cab start up almost immediately behind them. Quietly he gave directions to the cabby: 'Portland Place, driver, please.'

'I suppose I'd better go home,' Lorna said dubiously. 'Will you be safe?'

'This time, no risks,' said Mannering. 'I'll lock the doors, back and front, make sure the windows are safe, and keep a gun by my side.' He beamed at her. 'Don't let it get on your mind too

much, darling, you concentrate on Thursday, at two o'clock.'

'Do you really think we'll make it?'

'Bristow will probably come as a witness,' Mannering prophesied confidently. 'Damn it, I can't let the Registrar down!'

They said little more, but twice Mannering glimpsed the taxi following, and thought uneasily that Bristow might have phoned the Yard to have the station watched. He said nothing, however, and when they turned into Portland Place the taxi passed one end of it.

Mannering left Lorna, hoping that his fears were unfounded.

His taxi was waiting. As it started off, he saw at the far end of the Square, another, about to follow.

He toyed with the idea of telling the driver to go a long way round, but decided against it. If he was to have a joust with anyone from the Yard it would be as well to lose no time. Nevertheless, as he paid off his driver, his heart was thumping unpleasantly.

Mannering stepped into the flat, took off his hat and coat, and then stood waiting for an approach to the front door, his mind busy with plausible arguments against any accusation from the police.

He heard footsteps approaching.

Fast upon them came a sharp ring at the front door bell. He moved towards the door, half-expecting Bristow, even, perhaps, Baptiste or Garstang who might have escaped. His hand on his gun he opened the door, slipping to one side, out of the way of shot or blow.

The confrontation, however, was with none of these men. Framed in the dark doorway was the figure of Leonora-Lucille.

Chapter Twelve

With Reservations

Mannering said flippantly: ‘Have you paid the cabby off?’

‘Yes, of course. So you knew I was following?’

‘It wasn’t as well done as all that,’ Mannering said evasively. Fear of police intervention was receding, although it was possible that she in turn had been followed.

‘Well, then, now you’re here you’d better sit down.’ He spoke without enthusiasm, knowing that this was the beginning of a crisis, giving up all hope that Leonora-Lucille had failed to recognise him at the house.

She said: ‘You look tired. You seem to have been having a very busy and energetic time. I’m not sure you aren’t limping.’

Mannering grinned. ‘I’m not sure I’m not either.’

‘And it is not funny!’ flared Leonora. ‘I know all about you. I’m not going to be tricked again, Mr. Baron!’ She snapped the name, staring at him to study the effect of her denunciation.

‘The old, old illusion,’ Mannering said lazily. ‘What’s made you so sure?’

‘I saw you at Grey House.’

‘And where’s Grey House?’

‘Where you were tonight,’ said Leonora sharply, ‘where you threatened Mortimer, Grant, and Netley.’ She paused, then went on quickly. ‘Just because you helped me is no reason for thinking I shall allow you to escape.’

‘The fairy tale goes on,’ murmured Mannering. ‘Mortimer, Grant, and—what did you say was the other fellow’s name?’

She spoke abruptly. ‘You were there, and you saved us from Baptiste and the other man. For that I am grateful, but I am no fool. I have no further doubt. The police would be very interested to know that the Baron was at Grey House.’

‘They’d be interested to know you were there too,’ suggested Mannering.

‘You will never tell them,’ said Leonora confidently. ‘You are too worried about what I can say.’

Mannering said lazily: ‘All right, I’m worried, let’s assume I was at Grey House and saved you from Baptiste. What happened then?’

Leonora said: ‘You climbed on the running-board of Netley’s car. Then you went to the station, I saw you and your friend there. I was on your train and followed you from Charing Cross. I waited outside the café where you had supper, and I came in a taxi after you. Must you go on pretending?’ She spoke fiercely but with an undercurrent of appeal, and Mannering grew suddenly aware that this interview mattered very much to her.

He said: ‘All right, have it your way. I’m not the Baron, Leonora, but I was at the house. I want to find where those jewels have gone, and I’m not sure the police can get them on their own. In any case it’s going to be difficult for you and Champbourcy until they’re found, although we should have a better chance now that Bristow has got Baptiste, Garstang, and Mortimer’s helpmates under lock and key. But I can’t help you until I know all the truth.’

‘Why did you not offer to help in the first place?’ Leonora demanded hotly. ‘I would have told you everything then. Instead you had to go to the police—’

‘And after tonight Baptiste will be in a cell,’ Mannering reminded her. ‘Out of the police cometh results. I know the police, and I know what you can safely do against them. You would have gone too far. In fact you’ve gone too far already, and they’re following you everywhere they can.’

‘They did not follow tonight,’ said Leonora confidently. ‘I evaded them.’

He said quietly: ‘Don’t be too cocky. There’s a little proverb about it.’

She glared at him, then suddenly her lips curved at the corners. ‘You and your proverbs. You are an exceedingly foolish man, but it is impossible not to laugh at you.’

‘That will be a help,’ said Mannering.

‘But now we have no time to waste,’ said Leonora swiftly. ‘I promised to tell you everything, so far you have heard only a part of it. To start – Champbourcy did bring the Collection and with him Lucille Durand. Where she is now I do not know. The jewels were stolen from him at the hotel where I met him. It was then that he asked me for help, and I heard of everything. It was thought to be a good idea if I took the place of Lucille Durand and appealed to you.’

‘Why me?’ asked Mannering.

Her eyes scorned him.

‘Must you be so obstinate? Gironde of Paris had told him that you were the Baron and would be prepared to buy the jewels at a fair price, or else would tell him where they could be sold. You would not take advantage of his difficulties, Gironde said, and it would be quite safe to tell you the whole truth.’

‘Gironde evidently has a high opinion of the Baron,’ said Mannering dryly.

‘That is why you disappointed me,’ snapped Leonora, ‘it was a shock. But now—’ She shrugged. ‘I can understand, you have to make it clear to everyone that you are not the Baron. Please yourself, all I need is your help and if you give me that I shall not betray you to the police.’

Mannering looked at her without speaking.

‘So you will be quite safe,’ she went on off-handedly. ‘Now – the real trouble is this. The jewels were stolen, and we needed your help to find them again. Champbourcy had retained one of the Tears of Antoinette, with which to obtain your interest. All the time we were frightened of Baptiste and the other man with good reason as you will admit. But we knew they had not the Collection. They were searching for it.’

‘Do you know who has?’

‘No, I have no idea,’ said Leonora decisively. ‘Let me explain more, please. Earlier we had approached Mortimer, whom you saw tonight. He was not able to offer to buy the Collection himself, the value was too great. He promised to obtain the interest of others. Grant is a safe man, but Netley—’ Her lips

curled.

'Not a hero, no,' admitted Mannering.

She shrugged. 'Baptiste did not have the Collection, yet it was gone. We needed you to find it for us.'

'Thanks,' said Mannering, 'but tell me, why did you go to Mortimer?'

'He was recommended to Champbourcy.'

'Also by Gironde?'

'We tried to find you first, but you were in the Army and we could not,' said Leonora sharply. 'We had to try to sell, we were without money. Remember my share was only to come if we sold the jewels.'

Mannering nodded, and was silent for some minutes.

That the Frenchman should have tried to find him and, failing, gone to Mortimer and the others was natural enough. It explained one of the questions that had been worrying him. He did not think he had heard all of the story yet, and there was one deception she was maintaining with desperate earnestness. He did not refer to that immediately, but asked at last: 'Have you seen anyone else?'

Leonora hesitated. She was at a high pitch of tension, as if she restrained herself only with an effort. 'One other, yes,' she said abruptly.

'The man who told Bristow that your real name was Leonora Drake?'

She flashed: 'So he told the police, the swine! How did you know of that?'

'I didn't know, but Bristow was told. Baptiste or Garstang could have told him; Mortimer, Netley or Grant could have told him – they know what you're doing, I take it?'

'Yes.' She waved a hand. 'I have told them nearly all that I have told you. But there was someone else, a man, who calls himself Penrose. I went there from the hotel this morning. I will tell you just what happened between him and me.'

'Good,' said Mannering, and then casually. 'Have you had any food, by the way?'

'I am not hungry, do not talk of food now!'

‘There are some biscuits in the larder,’ said Mannering.

She hesitated, then walked airily into the kitchen. Mannering smiled to himself. He wished he could believe her; her manner was refreshingly direct.

He wondered how the hitherto unknown Penrose fitted in.

Leonora returned with a plate of biscuits in her hand.

‘There should be some Chablis in that cabinet.’

*You will drink with me?’

‘Thanks, yes,’ said Mannering. He watched her pour the wine.

‘You know of wines,’ she said approvingly. ‘Now, Penrose! A dog of a man, Penrose, very old and frightening. I have no idea how he learned what I was doing, but I had a letter from him at the Regal. He lives in a house in Putney, and asked me to go to see him. I went.’ She sipped the wine appreciatively. ‘This Penrose offered me money, knowing that Champbourcy had the Tear; he said he would pay me a thousand pounds for it, and a hundred if I tried to get it. I needed the money, so of course I promised to try.’

‘Very moral of you,’ murmured Mannering.

‘A fine thing to say, coming from the Baron!’ She glared at him. ‘Afterwards, when Champbourcy had lost the jewel, I went to Penrose and told him. He was not pleasant, but I demanded my hundred pounds. He gave me fifty,’ she added with satisfaction. ‘It will be very useful.’

‘What about Mortimer and Company. Wouldn’t they finance you?’

The girl shook her head with a look of wisdom beyond her years. ‘Had Mortimer and his friends known how badly I needed money, and how little Champbourcy had, they would have reduced their price for the Collection by a half.’

Mannering said: ‘Is that all?’

‘That is everything, yes.’

Mannering leaned back, watching her as she tried to stare him out.

‘I said that was everything!’ she snapped.

‘I heard you,’ said Mannering.

‘Are you suggesting that I lie?’

‘Yes,’ said Mannering equably.

‘And you do not mind that I pay you back for such an insult? I saw the way Bristow and the other man watched you, they are trying to find a way of tricking you all the time. I can tell them you were at Grey House, and they will act swiftly. You must know that,’ she added tensely. ‘You cannot be fool enough to risk it!’

‘Well, well. Will you tell them that you’re really Lucille, and not Leonora?’ Mannering asked politely.

Chapter Thirteen

How Many Suspects?

The ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece was very clear.

Leonora-Lucille's slim hands clenched.

'What are you saying?' The words burst from her.

'The answer is so obvious that I hardly need to tell you,' pleaded Mannering. 'You give yourself away too often. Your manner is French, your clothes are French, you wear that suit like a born Parisienne. There are other indications, but they're enough. Admit it, now. You're Lucille.'

'You—you are guessing!'

'Does that matter, as I guessed right?'

Lucille jumped up and paced the room. 'All right, then, I am Lucille Durand! You want the truth – here it is! I escaped from France with the Collection. My father also escaped, he is in Switzerland, perhaps he will be able to get to this country. The Collection is his, but it was arranged that I should sell it with Champbourcy's help. Today we need money not only for ourselves but for our friends. We need to help France, and with money much can be done. Laugh if you must, that is true!'

'I'm not laughing,' Mannering said gently. 'Why didn't you tell the police, Lucille? That's what I can't understand.'

'Because of Baptiste! Because—because we believed much of the money from the Collection would have to be paid to England, because we had no right in England, we arrived by night as you have been told, we did not wish to declare ourselves. For that reason also I say I am Leonora.'

'Penrose thought you were Leonora Drake?'

'There is a Leonora,' said Lucille sharply. 'She was with us in France, she was at a Paris theatre when the Nazis came, and with us she escaped. Baptiste—' She stopped abruptly, and

paled. ‘All the time I am afraid for Leonora. Because of her I was afraid to disobey him and go to the police. She did not get away with Champbourcy and I, Baptiste and his friends in England took her, she is their prisoner.’

Mannering said slowly: ‘I wish I believed that.’

‘You must believe it! It is true! When we landed in England and she was taken away I am frightened for her, I would do anything to find her. If only Baptiste is now with the police she will be all right, the little one. Mannering, why do you not believe me?’

‘You might think me more likely to help to find her than the jewels.’

‘Mon Dieu!’ gasped Lucille. ‘You do not even know her!’

‘I know Baptiste.’

Lucille’s lips quivered, and she turned away.

‘M’sieu Mannering, I do not try to excuse myself. I have been so long used to the Nazis and their ways, I have forgotten to think of others, to really think of them. Until now I did not understand that the jewels do not matter, now, but Leonora is important. I hate myself.’ She paused. ‘You know, now. Should the police know that, also?’

‘If they’ve found Baptiste, it’s not urgent,’ Mannering said. ‘You’ve set new problems, Lucille.’ He shrugged. ‘If you’ll bring me the telephone, I’ll see what I can do.’

She stared. ‘Who are you going to ring?’

‘A friend,’ said Mannering, telling her briefly about Lorna as he dialled the Portland Place house.

Some minutes passed before Lorna’s voice, heavy with sleep, sounded across the wires.

‘Hallo, darling, it’s John.’

Lorna’s voice sharpened. ‘John! What is it?’

‘No alarm or excursion,’ Mannering assured her hastily, ‘but Leonora-Lucille is here and stranded.’

‘So the police didn’t get her? Good. I’ll be over for her in half an hour, if that’s what you want.’

‘I thought I could rely on you. We’ll be waiting.’

He replaced the receiver, and Lucille asked urgently: ‘She is

to marry you? I am desolated.'

'Ah!' Mannering grinned. 'You don't *look* desolated.'

'I sing because I believe you will help and will find Leonora, the jewels, everything! It is not that I am heartless.'

'You could prove it by telling me more about Penrose.'

'A horror,' she began, her opinion of Penrose growing clearer with every word. She had been puzzled by the man's manner; he had taken it for granted that she would do what he wanted, and had clearly gone to a great deal of trouble to learn that Leonora Drake was in need of money, and had been smuggled from France. Lucille had continued the deception in the hope of getting news of the jewels.

Mannering frowned as he listened.

Penrose had made exhaustive inquiries about Leonora Drake, or else had known of her before he had sent for Lucille. Yet the man had not known the actress in person, or he would have realised Lucille was impersonating her.

Lucille had a vivid memory of the house and the man; her description of both was excellent. By the time she had finished, Lorna had arrived. She took charge of Lucille at once. Mannering saw them off with a certain amount of relief, noting a gleam of mockery in Lucille's eyes as she wished him goodnight. He viewed it a little uneasily.

Surely she had not completely deceived him? He reviewed what Lucille had told him, recalling her manner and expression, and decided that, weighing the pros and cons of every item, the balance was in favour of her sincerity.

'All the same, I'd like to prove it,' Mannering mused.

Mortimer, Grant, Netley, Baptiste, Garstang, and the man Penrose, all knew of the presence of the Collection in the country; probably amongst them the thieves would be found. Baptiste and Garstang could be struck off the list of suspects with reasonable safety, since their main object in working against

Champbourcy and Lucille appeared to be to find the jewels.

Mannering frowned, for Champbourcy must also be considered a suspect: he had been in charge of the Collection,

was acting as Durand's agent, might well have decided to hide them and announce they were stolen. On prima facie evidence, Champbourcy was the most likely thief, and his influence had doubtless weighed with Lucille, to keep her from going to the police. She would demand action of some kind, and Champbourcy could have satisfied her by approaching the Baron, thinking he might be persuaded to take a share in the proceeds while convincing Lucille that the jewels had been stolen by unknown thieves. As a theory it was plausible; against it was the memory of Champbourcy's manner. Mannering had liked the little man.

It was two o'clock when he decided to sleep on the confusion. He had hardly reached his bedroom when the front bell rang.

'Bristow,' he thought. But when he opened the door the thin glow of light fell on the figure of Mortimer, and beyond him, Grant.

Mannering eyed the two men with an expression of feigned surprise and polite bewilderment; but he could not wholly subdue his alarm.

'Good evening, Mr. Mannering.' Mortimer was abrupt. 'I think you recognise us.'

'I can't say I do,' murmured Mannering.

'Now don't start lying—' Grant began, but Mortimer turned sharply, a hand raised to stop the other from going on.

'I'd like ten minutes of your time,' Mortimer said, 'on an urgent matter of business.' He held out two cards, his own and Grant's.

'You could have chosen a better hour,' Mannering said testily. 'I was just going to bed.' He glanced briefly at the cards, then stood aside to let them pass, following them into the lounge. Both Mortimer and Grant looked pointedly at the two glasses. Mannering kept his face blank, but had difficulty in keeping his thoughts steady. Had Lucille told them his name?

Mortimer said slowly: 'Mr. Mannering, there's no need to beat about the bush. We know you were at the Grey House

tonight, and we propose to talk frankly about it.'

Mannering stiffened. 'I don't like your manner, nor your assumption.'

'We don't like your lies,' said Mortimer suavely, 'and I'm sure you'll be better advised than to maintain them.'

Mannering stood up.

'You know the front door,' he said. 'I don't propose to talk to you or listen to you. Get out.'

Mortimer's right hand slipped into his pocket.

'We met once before tonight, Mannering,' he said evenly, 'when we were at a disadvantage. We aren't now.' He drew his hand from his pocket, and showed the blue-grey of an automatic. 'Guns are persuasive, you know their value.'

'If you're not outside in two minutes,' said Mannering, 'I shall ring the police.' He picked up the telephone. 'I don't know you, I don't want to know you, I have not been to any Grey House, and I don't acknowledge the persuasion of a gun. Thirty seconds have gone.'

He had them guessing. Coldly he returned Mortimer's stare, giving the impression that he was too bored to be really annoyed.

'You can't act the fool like this!' Grant snapped.

Mortimer said: 'Mannering, you bluff well, but it's not good enough. Champbourcy told us that he had tried to get in touch with you, and we looked you up. You're of a height and build with the man we saw tonight, and it won't take long for us to prove that you were at Engmere.'

'Scotland Yard is Whitehall 1212, isn't it?' asked Mannering, and began to dial. 'What will the charge be? Uttering threats, attempting to do bodily harm, or illegal possession of firearms?' He had dialled three numbers, fully prepared for Grant to leap at him, when another ring at the front door took all their attention.

'Who's that?' Grant said sharply.

'I wouldn't know,' said Mannering, 'but I imagine it will be a policeman. Superintendent Bristow was going to look in tonight if he had time. That's why I'm up so late.' He sensed their

indecision, saw Mortimer put the gun back in his pocket.

He went to the door and admitted Bristow, who came in blinking against the strong light.

Standing behind Bristow, Mannering said suavely: 'Superintendent, let me introduce Mr. Mortimer and Mr. Charles Grant. They—'

'We had heard that Mr. Mannering might be in the market, Mr. Bristow,' said Mortimer swiftly, and Mannering was surprised to learn that he knew the Superintendent. 'Apparently he's no longer interested in buying precious stones. If you change your mind, Mannering, you know my address.' He nodded curtly as he stepped to the door with Grant on his heels.

Neither Mannering nor Bristow made any attempt to stop them, and the door closed quietly on a chorus of good nights.

Bristow's tired eyes surveyed Mannering without pleasure.

'So you're no longer interested in jewels,' he said sardonically.

Mannering raised a hand towards the ceiling. 'A perfect example of a man with but a single thought!' he said sorrowfully.

'Come off it, John. I know where you've been and what you've done,' said Bristow. 'You're being too clever again, but you won't succeed this time.'

'In what?' asked Mannering resignedly.

Bristow ignored the words, demanding: 'Where have you been tonight?'

'In and around London,' said Mannering sharply.

Bristow said just as sharply: 'A half truth, or shall I say a quarter one. One of our men was injured in the drive at Grey House, and another was found inside badly knocked about. He saw you and Miss Fauntley before you hit him. You won't be able to dodge this charge.'

'It looks to me as if it were they who should have dodged,' said Mannering. He waved to a chair. 'If you must stay around, sit down.'

'I'll stand,' said Bristow.

'I won't,' said Mannering. He sat down and waited,

wondering how much of Bristow's statement was true. If Vine had seen him and Lorna and was prepared to say so in court, the emergency was past, and had engulfed them: but he did not think Vine could be sure, the moonlight would make his testimony doubtful even if used in court.

Mannering felt his heart beating faster.

'Now look here,' Bristow said suddenly, 'why not be frank with me? You could help us rather than hinder. There's no real proof that you struck Vine, although he knows you were there. You left him comfortable, and you left me four prisoners. That'll go a long way towards making the Assistant Commissioner well-disposed towards you.'

'If I'd been handing you crooks on a platter I'd be grateful for the praise,' Mannering said. 'As it is you're talking nonsense, and I've already told you I'm tired.' He felt easier at this confirmation that Baptiste and Garstang were in the hands of the police as well as Mortimer's roughnecks. The roughnecks could say they had been attacked by an officer in uniform, but there was no satisfactory proof that it had been Mannering; had there been, Bristow would have made no appeal to reason. Bristow was bluffing.

'Is that your last word?' Bristow asked stonily.

'Didn't it sound like it?'

Bristow snapped: 'Where's Leonora Drake?'

'With my fiancée.'

Bristow stared, surprise pushing other emotions out of his expression.

'You admit that!'

'Oh, hold it,' said Mannering wearily. 'Miss Drake came to see me again. She's worried, and far from happy. I asked Lorna to look after her. If you want to see her you'll find her at Portland Place, but for heaven's sake let her have a good night's rest. You're keeping Champbourcy, I suppose?' he added casually.

'We're not charging him yet,' Bristow said.

'Aren't you, by George! A sudden attack of cold feet, or do you think he's telling the truth?'

‘Damn your eyes,’ said Bristow with feeling. ‘Look here, I’ve the sense to know you wouldn’t take time out of ten days’ leave and a honeymoon to start nicking jewels. You’re only interested because of Champbourcy and the girl. There’s nothing illegal about that. Why keep stalling?’

‘Because you’re not consistent,’ said Mannering blandly, ‘and I can’t trust you not to start riding your old delusion that I’m the Baron. Now be a good soul and go home. I’m tired out.’

Bristow turned towards the door.

‘You’ll regret this attitude, Mannering.’

‘I’ll send you a card when I do. By the way, if you want to send a present as a token of your regard, or be a witness at my —’

The door slammed.

Mannering was only momentarily relieved by Bristow’s departure, knowing that he could have had something up his sleeve which he kept back. Wondering what, of many possibilities, it could be, Mannering was some time getting to sleep.

He awakened soon after nine o’clock the next morning. At once the whole affair swept through his mind again. Just as Leonora Drake might not exist, except in Lucille’s imagination, so was the evidence that the Durand Collection was in England dependent on Lucille’s testimony.

He hoped Bristow would not go to Lucille that morning. He no longer felt he could trust her to keep silent.

Chapter Fourteen

Action By The Police

It was not Bristow's habit to telephone the Assistant-Commissioner in the middle of the night, and when Ffoulkes answered the call which took him from his bed after three o'clock, his response was neither testy nor reproachful.

He could hear the note of excitement in the Superintendent's voice.

'The man Garstang has talked, sir, and I think we can close the leakage in Dorset. He and Baptiste have travelled across Channel regularly for six months. They get help along the coast.'

'What have you done?' asked Ffoulkes swiftly.

'I've telephoned Dorchester, and they're moving at once. They know the place, it's a fisherman's cottage they've been watching since we told them there was a leakage. Larramy and West, the other two men, are associates of Garstang, they all work for a man they either can't or won't give away. I think it's can't. They get instructions by letter or telephone. Larramy and West had orders to pick up two men tonight and take them to Grey House, but they don't know who their passengers were. They attacked Vine, Larramy's admitted that. An officer they didn't see clearly enough to identify, attacked them. I think we owe their capture to Mannering, but there's no direct evidence. He was near Engmere earlier in the evening, Garstang travelled with him on the train.'

'Have you got anything definite on Mannering?' Ffoulkes asked.

'Nothing conclusive,' Bristow told him. 'Garstang says that Mannering offered to work with him to get the Durand stones, but Mannering could say that it was a ruse. We'll need

something stronger than that if we're to detain him.'

'H'm, yes,' admitted Ffoulkes. 'Anything else?'

'Nothing but confirmation of Champbourcy's story, and the girl's,' said Bristow. 'The jewels were brought over here, and someone stole them. Garstang says he doesn't know who. There was the other girl, Lucille Durand, who went with the thieves. I can't pretend I've worked it out yet, sir. I—' He broke off, then said: 'Will you hold on a moment, there's a call on the other line.'

Ffoulkes held on for several minutes, until Bristow spoke again, sharp and incisive.

'That was from Dorchester. They've got the fisherman; he's admitted helping Garstang and others into the country. That's settled, thank God.'

'Well, congratulations,' said Ffoulkes slowly, 'but I wish we didn't owe it all to Mannering.'

Bristow pushed the telephone away from him, smoothed his hair, and then sent to the canteen for some tea. It was nearly four o'clock and hardly worth going home to bed.

The action in Dorset was ample compensation for difficulties ahead. There would be no further smuggling into the country; he could set himself to concentrating on the case proper without fear of further external complications.

For the time being at least he was more interested in finding Garstang's mysterious employer than in Mannering or the jewels.

Lucille sat on the edge of the bed, while Lorna, at the dressing-table, brushed out her hair.

'And now you see I am really worried in case he doesn't believe me,' she was saying. 'I was a fool not to tell him about Leonora in the first place.'

'You were,' said Lorna emphatically.

Lucille found, and put on, a pair of slippers.

'You don't like me, do you?' she asked tentatively.

'I don't know you well enough to like or dislike you,' said Lorna, 'but I do know that if you don't get dressed quickly John

will be here. It's after ten o'clock.'

Lucille stretched her arms above her head. She looked very appealing. 'Lorna, please don't dislike me. I was foolish, but so worried. Make him believe me. You can, if you will.'

Lorna smiled with her lips, but her eyes were cloudy.

'I'll try, Lucille. Now get some clothes on or you'll catch cold. The bathroom's the first door on the right.'

Lorna was just putting the final touch to her hair when a servant tapped on her door, an oldish man who had grown grey in the Fauntleys' service.

'Good morning, Miss Lorna. A young gentleman is downstairs, a rather insistent young gentleman, asking to see Miss Drake.'

Lorna said sharply: 'Miss Drake? You're sure?'

'Quite sure, Miss Lorna.'

'Did he give his name?'

'Grant,' said Forbes, standing aside as Lorna went into the passage, 'Captain Grant.'

Lorna walked quickly down the staircase, seeing the lounge door open and the back of a man standing near the window. A square, khaki-clad back, that of a younger man than the Grant Mannering had named the previous night.

'Good morning,' Lorna said quietly.

The caller swung round eagerly, but at sight of Lorna his expression altered, his grey eyes reflected surprise and shock. He was no more than twenty-four, fair-skinned, pleasant-looking, wholesome.

'Oh, I'm sorry. I thought—look here, won't she see me?'

'She doesn't know you're here yet,' Lorna said.

'Hang it, there's no reason why I shouldn't call,' said Captain Grant with visible annoyance. 'I suppose she's told you about me—' He stopped abruptly, then went on: 'I heard Leonora was here, and hoped she'd see me.'

'How did you know where she was?' Lorna asked.

'My father told me. Why, isn't it generally known?'

'Not generally, no,' said Lorna. 'I'll tell her you're here if you'll wait a few minutes.'

‘Oh, good! I say, I hope I didn’t drop a brick.’

‘Not on my toes,’ said Lorna, smiling.

She tapped on the door of Lucille’s bedroom.

‘Am I so late? One minute, and I will be ready.’ The door was flung open.

Lorna said quietly. ‘Lucille, do you know a Captain Grant?’

‘Grant!’ exclaimed Lucille. ‘No, no, I don’t know him. I—’

‘He’s downstairs, asking for Leonora Drake,’ said Lorna. Lucille put a hand against the dressing-table to steady herself.

‘I can’t see him, Lorna, please! He must not see me, he knows that—’ She stopped abruptly. Lorna waited for her to go on. ‘It doesn’t matter now that you know. But the police do not, they believe I am Leonora Drake.’

‘Doesn’t Captain Grant?’

‘No, of course not! He knows the real Leonora, he was in love with her in Paris, he—oh, what shall I do? How does he know I am here?’

‘We’ll leave this to John,’ Lorna decided. ‘Grant knew the real Leonora, you say, but did he know you?’

‘No, I saw him only once or twice, quite by accident. He was a worry to Leonora, she was not interested in him, but—Lorna! He will be able to prove there is a real Leonora, at least he will do that good.’

Lorna went to her own room, followed by Lucille, and dialled Mannering’s number.

Lucille’s tension grew, as she listened to the one-sided conversation. Then Lorna turned and held the telephone towards her. She took it eagerly.

‘Lucille,’ greeted Mannering grimly, ‘you forget too much and too often. Has Grant tried to see you before, since you reached England?’

‘Yes, of course, several times,’ Lucille burst out. ‘I have always avoided him, think what disaster it would be if he knew that I was not Leonora! He would go to the police, everything would be over!’

Mannering said sharply: ‘How long ago did he know Leonora?’

‘Before the war started he was in France, stationed near Paris, and often waited on Leonora at the stage door of the Folies. A good earnest young man, she said, he was a great trouble to her.’

‘Did you know his father?’

‘Father? You cannot mean the other Grant, Mortimer’s friend? But I cannot believe it, nothing could be so cruel!’

Mannering said tersely: ‘Don’t see him until I come, Lucille. Lorna will keep him there long enough. Good-bye.’

He rang off, and Lucille turned to stare stormily into Lorna’s eyes.

‘He arranges everything, your John!’

‘Only when it is first disarranged,’ said Lorna shortly. ‘I’ll see Grant, and then we’ll have breakfast brought up here. Don’t come down.’

Grant turned eagerly to Lorna on her return. He was sorry that he had called at such an inconvenient time but would gladly wait. He hated giving so much trouble, but hoped Miss Fauntley would do all she could to persuade Leonora to see him.

Lorna left him contented enough and ordered a tray to be sent to her room.

Mannering arrived fifteen minutes later, shown into the same room in which Charles Grant, junior, was pacing up and down. He formed a quick liking for the man, yet did not let his suspicions, ill-formed though they were, be entirely dispersed.

He looked amiably into Grant’s face. ‘You’ll probably want to get violent with me,’ he said, ‘but hold it for a few minutes. I’m told you met Leonora Drake in Paris eighteen months ago.’

Grant stared, his face set.

‘I did. I don’t quite see what that has to do with you.’

‘I’m a bit vague myself,’ admitted Mannering. ‘Was it your father who told you she was in London?’

‘Just what are you driving at?’ Grant’s voice was coldly formal. ‘I can’t allow your right to cross-examine me.’

‘Not a right,’ said Mannering, ‘but a privilege, I hope. Miss Drake is in considerable trouble, and between us we might be able to help her.’

Grant took a short step forward.

'Please get to the point!'

'I'm trying to, but I can't until I know just how you learned that she was in London,' Mannering insisted.

'I hope you are not trying to fool me,' said Grant abruptly, 'I'm on leave after a dose of pleurisy, and spending a week or two at home. My father mentioned the other day that he'd seen Leonora in London.'

'Just like that?' asked Mannering.

'Just like that. She had called with a message from a friend of his, a man named Mortimer. He understood that she was staying at the Regal, but when I called there she was never in. Though why the devil she had to avoid me like the plague, I don't know.' He paused, and then went on: 'This morning Dad told me he'd heard that she was staying with Miss Fauntley, so I came round. Hang it, she can at least tell me why she won't see me!'

Mannering thought swiftly: 'So Mortimer or Grant had the flat watched, followed Lorna and Lucille last night, and passed this on to Charles Junior. Grant would do that, for it would pay him to have Leonora and Charles friendly for the time being.' He did not think it likely that there was more in the visit than there appeared, although he could not discard the possibility that young Grant was acting.

'Now perhaps you'll tell me what you want to know?'

'Ye-es,' said Mannering, 'but it isn't easy. In the first place the girl staying here isn't Leonora. She's Lucille Durand, using Leonora's identity because it's easier for her to get about London. That way she doesn't have to register as an alien.'

Grant stared. 'But where—' he began, his face reflecting amazed bewilderment.

'It's a long story,' Mannering interrupted, 'and I'm not sure how much I'm at liberty to tell you. Are you really anxious to find Leonora?'

'Doesn't it look like it? Listen, Mannering, you said something about trouble for her. Is Leo in the country, or isn't she? This evasion is getting on my nerves, I won't be fooled

with any longer.'

'It might do more than get on your nerves,' said Mannering. 'Lucille, whom your father apparently thinks is Leonora, has done what the police would call obstructed them in the course of their duty. They also know her as Leonora, and they want to ask many awkward questions. I can't tell you all the issues involved, but I can tell you that Leonora has been abducted by the people who helped her to escape to England, and they're holding her as a hostage against Lucille Durand. The issues are fine ones. If the police learn that Leonora's missing they'll probably start a series of arrests which would do more harm than good.'

'Good God!' gasped Grant. 'Is this a fairy story?'

Mannering said: 'Do something for me, Grant. Tell your father what I've told you, and judge from his reactions whether it's true or not.'

'My—damn it, what's Dad got to do with it?'

'He buys jewels. Lucille Durand has a valuable collection to sell. Leonora is a hostage against the jewels.'

Grant paused, with hands clenched, then exclaimed: 'What a damnable set-up! Mannering, if I thought—but you can't pitch a story like this unless it's true,' he broke off helplessly. 'All right, I'll go and see Dad. But before I go I want to see Miss—Miss Durand.'

'That's easy enough,' said Mannering.

Lucille entered the room five minutes later. Charles looked at her, his expression giving no hint that she was known to him.

Lucille's restraint broke.

'Captain Grant, believe me, please. No harm came to Leonora because I wished it, I could not help myself.'

'Er—I'm sure of that,' said Charles awkwardly. 'I'm sorry you're finding things tough.'

Mannering brought Charles back to earth quietly.

'Have you any objection to my coming with you?'

'Oh no. Glad if you will,' said Charles. 'Er—yes, I have seen her before. I remember now. She was with Leonora sometimes, although I hadn't eyes for anyone else.' He coloured, but eyed

Mannering squarely, a likeable young man but no fool. He proved that when they were in the taxi and he had recovered his composure, by saying abruptly: ‘Captain Mannering, you’ve inferred that my father’s interested in the jewels although knowing they’re stolen.’

‘As far as I know he’s only interested in finding and buying some of them,’ Mannering said mendaciously. ‘I’m imputing no illegal methods, Grant, but I do think he might be able to give us useful information. How long has he worked with the man Mortimer?’ he asked casually. ‘Didn’t you say Mortimer sent Lucille with a message?’

‘Yes. Dad thought she was Leonora all right, and Mortimer would too. They’ve done business together for some years.’

‘Do you know of their immediate plans?’

Grant looked at him in frowning uncertainty.

‘I wish I knew what you were leading up to. I don’t know much about it, but I do know that there is a big deal pending. Dad’s seeing Mortimer about it tonight, meeting him at a house in Putney.’

Mannering was cheered by news of the Putney rendezvous; Lucille had said that Penrose lived at Putney, and there might be a connection.

The cabby stopped at the Hatton Garden address Grant had given him.

Alighting, they entered a small, dark shop, lined with show cases. An assistant bowed to Charles who led the way to a flight of steps, explaining: ‘The office is up here. I wonder if you’ll wait—’

He stopped then.

From upstairs there came a high-pitched shout, then a flurry of footsteps. Someone spoke in a loud voice, demanding: ‘What is it? What is it?’

A voice which Mannering recognised as Netley’s gave an incoherent answer. Charles Grant bounded up the stairs, Mannering behind him, while Netley’s high-pitched voice grew more shrill and incoherent.

‘Get a doctor—get the police! A doctor, hurry—’

‘What’s the trouble?’ Charles’ voice held a new note of authority. He reached a landing well ahead of Mannering, who arrived in time to see him staring down at the body of his father.

The older Grant was lying on his back, one side of his head bloody and battered. Lying close to it was a diamond, one of the three Tears of Antoinette.

Chapter Fifteen

The Second Tear

Mannering went down on one knee and felt for Grant's pulse, but could find no hint of life.

Netley began to move papers on the desk. He picked up a black case, opening it before Mannering could stop him.

'Look, the Rosira pearls! I knew he was trying to buy them, I knew it! And—good God! Look, look at that!'

Netley pointed a quivering finger towards the Tear.

Mannering snapped: 'Don't touch anything, you fool! Grant, will you ask one of your clerks to telephone Scotland Yard and to ask Superintendent Bristow to come here. Say that Captain Mannering asked for him, and that he'll need finger-print men and photographers.'

Grant gave the necessary order at once.

'It will be wise if the room is closed up until the doctor and the police arrive,' Mannering went on quietly.

Netley hurried to the door, but before he reached the head of the stairs, Mannering added: 'No one should be allowed to go in or out, but you'll know that.'

'What do you mean?' Netley's lips were working, his nerves apparently being in no better state than on the previous night. 'I have to go to an important appointment, I'm late already. I'll be back by noon.'

'You can telephone to put off the appointment,' said Mannering curtly.

Netley flared: 'Why should I? Who are you to order me about?'

'I'm not ordering you or anyone, I'm telling you what the police will expect.' Mannering stared into Netley's protuberant eyes, while Charles Grant eyed his father's friend with obvious

contempt.

'I—I don't know what to say, it's not your business,' muttered Netley, and went downstairs uncertainly.

As Mannering closed the door, the younger man said quietly: 'Is this connected with Leonora Drake?'

'Probably,' said Mannering. 'The big diamond was part of the Durand Collection.' He eyed Grant curiously, seeing his set expression, wondering what the man would decide. He expected that Grant would insist on telling the police all that had been told him, and was planning the best way to prepare Lucille for a police visit.

'How is it going to affect Miss Durand if the police know the truth about her?' Grant asked.

'I don't know. She'll probably be interned.'

'Need the police know?'

'I hadn't allowed for that yet, but this—'

'Getting someone else in a jam won't help my father,' Grant said. 'I remember hearing about you, Mannering. You've worked with the police at times, haven't you? Until I've had time to think things out, will you—will you deal with them?'

'Yes,' promised Mannering, 'I'll do what I can.'

Grant said abruptly: 'I'm assuming that you'll do everything possible to find who did this fiendish thing?'

'Don't worry on that score,' said Mannering. 'We'll find him.'

Grant nodded, stared at the closed door, then turned the key in the lock and slipped it into his pocket.

'I want a drink,' he said. 'Let's go along here.'

In the next fifteen minutes Mannering learned that the dead man had two rooms above the premises that he used occasionally for sleeping in, but that his flat was in Bayswater, 21c Grey Street, and he had been there until after nine o'clock, when Charles had left. Grant drank a stiff whisky and soda while talking, and some colour returned to his cheeks although he continued to speak abruptly, as if unable to focus his thoughts.

Mannering learned also that Grant senior had been a business associate of Mortimer and Netley for some years.

Young Grant apparently had had no suspicion that his father ever handled or wanted to handle ‘suspect’ gems. He could not, he said, believe it now, declaring emphatically that his father’s business methods were irreproachable. The younger man had been a partner until enlisting, and had worked a great deal in Paris.

The doctor arrived almost at the same time as Bristow and his men.

Bristow spared little time for Mannering, but began an interrogation of the staff, and of Netley, who made no further outcry about leaving quickly. With young Grant, Bristow was brief and considerate.

The time dragged on, but Mannering made no attempt to telephone Lorna, knowing that patience was demanded, that Bristow would come to him when he judged the moment ripe.

A police-sergeant tapped on the lounge door.

‘Mr. Bristow would like to see you, Captain Mannering, please.’

Mannering moved to the door, and a few seconds later entered the room Bristow was using for his interrogations. A large desk had been cleared of everything but three cases of jewels and the Tear of Antoinette. At a smaller desk Tring was fingering a notebook.

Bristow looked up with a businesslike smile.

‘Sorry to keep you, Mannering. I had to get the others finished first.’

He waited until Mannering was settled, his manner a shade too friendly to be reassuring. ‘Now, if you’ll just tell me what happened, I’ll be glad.’

Mannering related what he had done from the time Lorna had telephoned. He spoke the truth except to omit that Leonora was actually Lucille, and his story had all the hallmarks of sincerity. He finished up with: ‘And then I telephoned for you. It was obviously your case, and I thought it best to be prompt.’

‘I’m glad you did,’ said Bristow heartily. His manner was beginning to worry Mannering; he had something up his sleeve, was waiting to reveal it when it would do most harm. ‘What

connection is there between the dead man and Miss Drake, do you know?'

'I've heard of none.'

'They were acquainted, weren't they?'

'The son tells me that he knew she was in town because his father had met her with Mortimer.'

'And that's the only connection you know about?'

'It is.'

Bristow leaned forward and began fingering the Tear. His gaze was fastened on Mannering's, his manner that of one about to approach the crisis-point.

'Do you recognise this?'

'Offhand, I'd say that it's one of the Tears of Antoinette.'

'Is it the stone you had in your flat – the one Garstang took?'

'I don't know,' said Mannering. 'I doubt if it's possible to tell one from the other without seeing them together, and probably only an expert could be sure which was which.'

Bristow closed his fingers about the Tear. 'This isn't the same one, as it happens. When we arrested Garstang at the house near Dartford he had one of the diamonds. This is the second. Do you see what that implies?'

'I see what it could imply,' Mannering said. 'That Grant was in touch with the people who have the whole Collection. It doesn't prove it, however. The Tears may have been kept separate from the rest.'

Bristow said blandly: 'What do you make of the murder?'

'That's pretty clear, isn't it?'

'Just what do you mean?'

'It wasn't for profit,' Mannering said. 'No one in their senses would kill for profit and leave that stuff on the table. It could have been a blow in a fit of fury, or it could have been to prevent Grant from talking.'

'Which one do you think likely?'

'It's an even choice,' Mannering said.

The tension was growing. Bristow uttered his questions with increasing sharpness, while Mannering sat back in his chair and prepared for the blow which he believed inevitable. He could

not decide how to parry questions until he heard how Bristow framed them, but through his mind flashed the temptation to tell the whole truth.

It passed quickly. Leonora Drake and Lucille kept him silent, he had to move carefully and without inconsistencies.

'An even choice?' queried Bristow. 'Now supposing you tell me the truth, Mannering. You knew Grant and Mortimer, and you had dealings with them. They visited you the other night because they wanted to buy the Collection from you. Don't interrupt!' barked Bristow, pushing his chair back. 'You've got the Collection! Champbourcy handed it over to you and you're selling it piece by piece. He stole it from Mam'selle Durand, you're working on it together. I interrupted your conference with Grant and Mortimer on how to divide the spoils. Grant grew restive, and threatened disclosure. That's why you killed him. That's it, isn't it?'

He was standing over Mannering, his manner bitterly accusing. How much was genuine, how much feigned, Mannering could not know.

He said quietly: 'There's not a word of truth in what you say.'

'What's the point of denying it, we can prove it.'

Mannering said coolly: 'Then prove it.'

Bristow raised a clenched hand, backed a pace as if to stop himself from using violence, and then said: 'All right, I'll talk to you at the Yard.' He stepped towards the door, and Mannering realised that he was going to bring an officer in, to send him to the Yard under guard. It was not a moment for hesitating or trying to understand what was Bristow's guiding motive, although he had a sickening feeling that Bristow had what he considered evidence to support his case.

He said: 'The bluff won't carry you, Bristow.'

'I'm not bluffing,' said Bristow. 'And I'm not going to rely on 18B. You've been slippery for a long time, but you've made your mistake at last. You'll enjoy the trial, Mannering, we'll have every tittle of evidence against you in the past brought in, we'll have the war off the headlines and the Baron in its place for a couple of days. You'll be sent down for ten years at the least.'

Mannering said coldly: ‘All right, go ahead and damn yourself.’

Bristow swung round.

‘Why don’t you admit what you’ve been doing? Good God, do you think I want you sent down for this? You started in it to help someone else, you’ve been tricked and cheated yourself. If you’d only have the sense to tell the truth, tell us how you got your hands on the Collection, we could have saved you this.’

‘How I what?’ exclaimed Mannering.

‘How you got the Collection. I can’t understand you,’ Bristow added more slowly, ‘to walk out of your flat and leave it there —’

Mannering’s hands gripped the arms of his chair.

‘Leaving the Durand Collection at my flat?’ He stared at Bristow in consternation, his heart thumping and his mind racing as he tried to find some explanation of this absurdity. He had to battle with himself to keep his voice even, while he returned Bristow’s stare, narrow-eyed. ‘At my flat? No, Bill, no. It isn’t possible. I’ve never set eyes on it.’

Bristow said: ‘Tring and I and another officer went there after you left this morning. The whole Collection except for two Tears of Antoinette was in the false bottom of your wardrobe. Explain that away if you can. If you can,’ repeated Bristow heavily.

Mannering’s mind was all confusion for the next hour.

Bristow sent word to Charles Grant that Mannering was going with him to the Yard, and telephoned another message to Lorna that he would be delayed. With Tring as third, they went to the Yard, going straight up to Ffoulkes’ office.

Mannering’s eyes turned towards the small table at the Assistant Commissioner’s side.

On it was displayed a collection of precious stones rarely seen in one place. Diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, pearls, so many that the eye could not take them in.

Ffoulkes said: ‘And you’ve always thought you were clever, Mannering.’

Mannering spoke with an effort.

'You know I'm not that kind of a fool. If they were found at my flat, I didn't put them there.'

'I'd almost like to believe it,' said Ffoulkes. Mannering stood in front of him, realising more fully the urgency and the danger. 'I thought you were in this for Leonora Drake's sake, that you had some fool idea of being a Sir Galahad to a helpless maiden.' Ffoulkes shrugged. 'I thought you would come to realise that you had to tell me the truth, if only to find how Baptiste and the others came into the country. I know now why you couldn't do that.'

He looked at the jewels.

Mannering said: 'I've told you everything I can about their illegal entry.' He walked towards the table, putting a hand out to lift one of the jewels.

At once Ffoulkes snapped: 'Don't touch them!'

'Don't be an ass,' said Mannering. He lifted a Tear of Antoinette. 'Have you the other one, Bristow?'

Bristow nodded.

'Let me have a look at it.' After a pause in which Bristow and Ffoulkes exchanged glances, Bristow took a wash-leatherbag from his pocket and extracted the Tear.

Mannering took it carefully, then placed it next to the one on the table, feeling an intensity of relief which made his voice unsteady.

'You may have found that stuff in my flat,' he said, 'although I didn't put it there, and didn't know it was there. But you haven't found the Durand Collection. All of this is paste or imitation, there isn't a genuine stone among them. Even you should see the difference,' he added sardonically, and pointed to the fire scintillating from the diamond Bristow had given him, a brilliance which put the rest of the jewels into shade.

Chapter Sixteen

Unknown Enemy

Lorna inserted a key in the door of Mannering's flat and stood aside for Lucille to enter. The two women stepped in, and Lorna called: 'John!'

There was no answer.

Lucille demanded tensely: 'Why hasn't he returned, Lorna, why does he have to leave us like this?'

'He hasn't gone deliberately,' Lorna said. 'I don't know who sent the message this morning, but if it was John he would have tried to ring again.' She paused. 'There were police watching outside.'

'Those two men we saw?' Lucille grew angry. 'It does not matter where I go, always I am followed.'

Lorna shrugged, and switched on an electric fire in the lounge. It was chilly, while the rain beat heavily against the windows.

They had been there half an hour when they heard footsteps on the landing. Lucille was at the door first, opening it quickly. Lorna's eyes were glowing as she prepared to greet Mannering, and then her expression altered.

'Oh!' exclaimed Lucille. 'It is you.'

Charles Grant looked at them, his face expressionless.

'Is Captain Mannering in?'

'No,' said Lorna. 'He hasn't been back since he left with you this morning.'

'Odd,' said Grant. 'I—er—I'd like to wait for him, if I may. You've heard, of course?'

'Heard? Of what?'

Grant said in a stiff voice: 'So you haven't.' There was a strange, rather unhappy silence, and then he told them what

had happened at Hatton Garden.

Lucille interrupted him several times, and when he finished, stood with her back to the fire, her hands clenched at her sides.

'And you think it is my fault. Oh, *mon Dieu,* why did I have to bring those jewels? I thought I was acting for the best, you must believe that! I had no idea that death would follow. You must believe me!' Her voice broke as she took a step towards Grant. 'You must not blame me!'

Grant said harshly: 'Don't talk nonsense. It's not your fault, it's the fault of the swine who killed him. But why should he be killed, why should anyone want him dead? If it were robbery I could understand it, but it wasn't, the jewels were there. Dad couldn't have been dead for half an hour, if I'd gone earlier I might have—'

'You would have done but for me,' Lucille cried.

'I wouldn't have gone to the shop at all today if it hadn't been for you, I would have left him this morning and known nothing about it until the police called me.'

Grant dropped heavily into an easy chair.

'It was all so damnably easy for the swine. There's a back entrance to the office, often used for private calls. Father would have admitted the man who did it, he—it must have been someone who knew him, he would only see people that way by appointment.'

Lorna said: 'Do the police know that?'

'Oh yes. They're making inquiries, but no one at the shop knew that he had a visitor until Netley came.' He drummed his hands on the arm of the chair. 'I can't talk to the police, they're so damnably formal. I was hoping Captain Mannering would be here.'

'He can't be much longer,' Lorna said, and almost on her words a key scraped on the door.

Mannering paused on the threshold, blinking in the light.

'John,' said Lorna. There was a brief silence, and then Mannering smiled, reassuringly confident.

'Where have you been?' demanded Lucille. 'Why did you desert us like that?'

Mannering said: ‘A misunderstanding with the police, *cherie*. Some gentleman unknown planted a complete set of imitation jewels here for the police to find. They thought it was the genuine Collection.’ He chuckled, but Lorna saw the strain on his face and knew that he was worried more than he was likely to admit.

‘It isn’t possible!’ Lucille said flatly.

‘It happened,’ said Mannering.

Grant exclaimed: ‘Why on earth should they do that to you?’

‘At a guess because they’d prefer me in jail,’ said Mannering, ‘and they damned near got me there. I still don’t know why Ffoulkes and Bristow decided to let me out, they had a case for arrest all right.’

Lorna said, apparently apropos of nothing: ‘It’s Wednesday.’

Mannering looked at her, ignoring Grant and Lucille. ‘Tomorrow’s Thursday, yes.’

‘They are to be married,’ said Lucille. ‘Lorna told me.’

Grant exclaimed: ‘Oh my God, what a foul mess!’

‘A mess it is,’ admitted Mannering, ‘but we’ll get clear.’ Something about him told Lorna that he wanted to speak to Grant alone. She responded at once, and herded Lucille into the kitchen.

As the door closed, Grant looked at him sharply. ‘You are trying to tell me something, aren’t you?’

Mannering said bluntly: ‘You must forgive me if I rush things a bit, but time’s running out. Your father had one of the Tears in his hand when he died, and one possible inference is obvious. I think the police have taken it. He knew where the rest of the Collection was.’

‘Good God!’ exclaimed Grant. ‘I’d no idea.’ He paused blankly, then went on: ‘I just can’t keep pace with events.’

‘I can’t see any other reason for his death,’ Mannering said, ‘except that he knew where the Collection was, and who had it. He was in the market for the Collection, with both Mortimer and Netley.’

Grant said: ‘I’ve never liked that man.’

‘He doesn’t appeal to me,’ admitted Mannering, ‘but that

doesn't make him party to murder. I don't doubt the police will be showing an interest in him, and he'll have a good alibi whether he was involved or not. But you can see the next development, can't you?'

'I don't follow you,' admitted Grant.

'You will. The man who killed your father wanted time to make plans, wanted to get the police concentrating on the wrong angle. So he left the fake Collection here before committing the crime. The police were quick to find that, but made the mistake of being too sure of themselves. They didn't check the gems. Your father was killed because he knew who had the Collection, and might talk.'

'And so the police suspected you?'

'Precisely,' said Mannering. 'Anyhow, you don't need more telling of the connection between your problem and mine. You want the man who killed your father, I want the man who tried to frame me; it's almost certainly one and the same. We could take the straightforward line and tell the police about Lucille, but it might not bring any quicker results and it would be awkward for Lucille.'

'We mustn't do that,' Grant said abruptly.

'There's the risk that Lucille hasn't told all the truth,' said Mannering. 'She may be more deeply involved than we think, but provided she is the real Lucille Durand we can be pretty sure that she wants to get the Collection back, if nothing else.'

'You don't seriously doubt her, surely,' said Grant. The idea seemed to shock him.

'Not as much as I did,' said Mannering, 'but I'd give a lot to be sure that she really is Lucille.'

'She is.' Grant was emphatic. 'I remember seeing her in Paris, with Leonora.'

'We want more than that,' said Mannering. 'That's a job I'd like you to handle, Grant, if you can. There must be plenty of people in London who knew the Durands in Paris. Will you try to locate one?'

'I'll look after it,' Grant assured him. 'What are you going to do?'

‘I think I’d like a talk with Mortimer,’ said Mannering, ‘and a gentleman named Penrose. Penrose lives at Putney, where Mortimer and your father were to meet. Does the name strike a chord?’

‘No,’ said Grant, after reflection. ‘I don’t remember hearing it. He was talking to Mortimer on the ‘phone. He said he’d be there by ten o’clock and jotted down the address. It was a house in Putney, halfway up the hill.’

‘“Watchett”?’ asked Mannering.

‘Well, I’m damned! Yes, that was it.’

Mannering knew that the prospect of having something to do had helped the other, and Grant was eager to start. Mannering saw him to the door, saying as he went out: ‘Remember the police might be interested in you too, Grant. Keep your inquiries as quiet as possible. I’ll find out what I can about the Putney house.’

Grant smiled confidently and hurried down the stairs, while Mannering returned to the lounge.

Lucille eyed him coldly.

‘Is it necessary for you to keep so many secrets from us?’

Mannering smiled. ‘Yes, *cherie,* and you’ve taught me how to keep them.’

‘Pig!’ exclaimed Lucille.

But Lorna was in no mood to be amused.

‘What are you going to do?’ she asked.

‘Puzzle the police,’ said Mannering promptly. ‘Bristow and Ffoulkes are wondering if I hit Grant too hard in a scuffle. I’m free, but on a long rope. The killer isn’t likely to lose a chance of tightening it. I’m Bristow’s target, and it’s up to me to provide an alternative one.’

Lorna saw the sense of it, but it made her even more uneasy than she had been before.

When they had gone, Mannering looked out of the window, to see a plain-clothes policeman following them. Tring was also in the street watching the flat.

Bristow would probably be with Mortimer; the police must see the inferences as clearly as he had done, acknowledging the

possibility, even probability, that Grant had been killed because he knew where the Collection was.

It was seven o'clock, and growing dusk, when the telephone rang.

Grant was on the other end of die wire, excited and pleased. He had been given a full description of Lucille Durand by a friend, and there was no reasonable doubt that their Lucille was genuine. The friend had a photograph somewhere, and was trying to find it. As soon as it turned up he would telephone again. The police had been watching him all the evening, but had asked no further questions.

'Now what else can I do?' Grant asked.

'Where are you now?'

'I'm at home, at Grey Street.'

'Right. I'll telephone you later. If I want you to meet me near Putney, as I might, you'll have to get away from the house without being followed. It'll probably be in about an hour's time, before the moon's up.'

'I'll be waiting.'

Mannering rang off, then nodded to himself decisively. He knew that the flat opposite was empty, and taking a key from his key-case opened the door and went in. Going to the telephone he dialled an Aldgate number.

A man's cultured voice answered him. It was that of Flick Leverson, whom Mannering had known for years as a fence, and who knew the Baron's identity. Between Leverson and Mannering there was a friendship based on a deep love of jewels, and there was real pleasure in Leverson's voice after Mannering had made himself known.

'Are you on leave, John? Because if you've an hour to spare —'

Mannering interrupted: 'I'm on leave and in a devil of a mess, Flick. Have you heard any rumours about the Durand Collection?'

There was a short silence. When Leverson spoke again there was a sharper note in his voice: 'You're not back at the old game?'

Mannering chuckled.

'You could say I'd been shanghaied into it, Flick. I'll tell you more when I see you. Meanwhile, have you heard anything of the Durand Collection?'

'Yes,' said Leverson. 'I've been told that Durand's daughter and Champbourcy brought it to England, or were bringing it. No more than a rumour.'

'Do you know of an old man named Penrose?'

Leverson's voice rose sharply.

'I do indeed, and if you are wise you'll have nothing to do with him, John. He's unreliable and'—Leverson paused—'he'll buy at a price.'

'That's what I expected,' said Mannering, a rising note of gaiety in his voice. 'Can you get me everything I'll need for tonight if I call for it in half an hour?'

'I can, but I don't know whether I should,' said Leverson. 'If you slip up you'll pay heavily, John.'

'I won't slip.'

'All right,' Leverson promised. 'I'll have all you need ready. Will you want to change here?'

'May I?'

'Yes, I'll arrange it. We'd better use call-boxes for phoning after this. I suppose your line's all right?'

'I'm not sure, I'm ringing from another flat.' Leverson chuckled. 'You don't change much.' Mannering replaced the receiver and returned to his flat, humming under his breath. Then he put on his great-coat and gave him a discreet hail.

'Hello, Tanker! I'm getting married tomorrow. What's in your mind as a present?'

Tring grunted and Mannering went on to Piccadilly. He stopped at the top of a subway for some seconds, seeing Tring's shadowy figure behind him, then went down the stairs.

Hurrying to the next subway, he sprinted up to ground level, then walked across the road and caught a taxi.

'Aldgate station,' he said to the driver and stepped in swiftly. Reaching Aldgate Mannering went into a telephone kiosk and dialled Grant's number: the youngster answered at once.

‘Meet me at Putney High Street station about nine-fifteen,’ Mannering said briefly.

‘Thank the Lord you rang through, I was just thinking you wouldn’t trouble.’

‘Don’t be an ass’, said Mannering. ‘I’ll do what I can.’

He walked from the kiosk to Petticoat Lane, fairly sure he had not been followed. Three minutes walk took him to Wine Street and Leverson’s front door. Before he knocked, the door opened.

‘I saw your torch,’ said Leverson quietly. ‘Come in.’

With the closing of the door the brighter light of the hall came on automatically, lighting up Leverson’s white hair and pale face, the empty sleeve of his left arm which he had lost in the First World War, all of which were as familiar to Mannering as if he saw him every day.

‘Everything’s ready for you,’ said Leverson. ‘We’d better go upstairs straight away. You’ll want to be off before the moon gets up I take it?’

Mannering nodded.

‘I suppose it’s no good – I know it’s no good – saying that I think you’re a damned fool to take such risks, John.’

As they entered a well-lighted bedroom, Mannering said crisply: ‘In this instance I can’t help myself. I’m being framed, Flick. Bristow’s on my heels, and believes I’m on the run at last.’ He smiled without humour as he sat down in front of a dressing-table, and pulled the stool closer. ‘That’s the setup. Here’s my answer.’

‘Does Lorna know?’

‘Yes. I don’t think this outfit’s been touched since I used it last.’

‘It hasn’t,’ Leverson assured him.

Spread out on the dressing-table was a theatrical make-up. Mannering began to work on his face, slowly at first but then more deftly, while Leverson listened to the full story.

At the end of it he said slowly: ‘And you think the man who planted the fakes will be after you again?’

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ asked Mannering, pausing with a stick of

grease-paint in his hand. ‘Someone knows I am the Baron, the same someone sees a chance of working under that cover and turning the spotlight on me. It’s not a question of whether I’ll work or whether I’ll stand by any longer, Flick, it’s a question of whether I get my man or he gets me.’

Chapter Seventeen

The House On The Hill

Leverson returned Mannering's gaze steadily, then nodded. Mannering gave his full attention to his make-up again, pondering what he had said to Leverson and the fact that it crystallised his thoughts since he had been told of the discovery at the flat.

More disturbing than anything else was the realisation that it would be impossible to completely forget the past, that the record of the Baron would live, a constant threat to his security and normal life.

Lorna must have thought on similar lines since he had first told her of Champbourcy's visit, yet she had encouraged rather than discouraged him, making it clear that she accepted the facts and was prepared to help him face them.

He smiled a little at the thought.

Meeting his reflection in the mirror he saw a much older man than the one who had entered the bedroom a spare half-hour before. The altered shape of the eyes was the cleverest part of the disguise, one which would deceive even the closest acquaintance, and had, indeed, often done so. He had made no serious attempt to hide the fact that he was made up, his only object being to delude an onlooker into thinking he was not Mannering.

Garstang had used make-up on the same principle.

That finished, he put on a suit which Leverson also provided. It fitted him comfortably, yet made his shoulders look rounded, filled out his stomach, and gave him the appearance of a portly, middle-aged man.

'You haven't lost any tricks,' Leverson smiled.

'It'll do,' said Mannering. 'Thank the Lord you hadn't parted

with the outfit, Flick.'

'I'm not likely to while you're alive,' said Leverson dryly. 'The tools are in the waistband.'

It was ten minutes to nine when Mannering left the Wine Street house, with the *bon voyage* of Leverson ringing in his ears. He walked quickly to Aldgate, then down to the trains, pausing once to make sure that he was not followed. His friendship with Leverson was known well enough for Bristow to take the precaution of having the station and house watched.

No one he recognised entered the platform.

A train rumbled in, and Mannering boarded it, sinking back behind an evening paper.

Anxiety for himself, Lucille, Grant and Leonora were subsidiary to the fact that he was the Baron again. The zest for danger and excitement was stirring again. It might never have faded.

At Earls Court Mannering had to change, but a Wimbledon train arrived quickly and in fifteen minutes he was at Putney Bridge. There was a taxi outside the station, and he took it to the other Southern Railway station at the top of the High Street.

The moon was rising, casting its first shadows about the houses and shops. In half an hour, thought Mannering, it would be full moonlight, perfect for working.

Two or three people were waiting outside the station, one of them in khaki. As Mannering climbed from the cab the man peered towards him, then turned away in disappointment. Mannering waited until he was alongside before surreptitiously making himself known.

Charles Grant swung on his heel.

'M-Mannering! Good God, what have you done to yourself?'

Mannering said: 'Call it an elementary precaution, Grant. I don't want to be recognised if I can avoid it. Sorry I'm late, but we won't be long now. You've got another spell of waiting ahead of you.'

'All right, let's have it,' Grant said resignedly.

'Penrose's house is half-way up Putney Hill, and he could be our joker,' explained Mannering. 'The appointment could have

been postponed, but Mortimer might keep it. I'm going to see what I can find, and you're staying outside to make sure no one catches me on the hop.'

Grant stopped in the middle of a step.

'Are you serious?'

'Never more so. We can't stop to let events catch us up, we've got to overtake them. We should be able to decide one way or the other about Penrose tonight. If he's the wrong man, then we know we must try elsewhere.'

'By George,' said Grant, 'you're a cool customer, Mannering. What will happen if the police come along?'

'It would be just too bad,' said Mannering. 'You're there to make sure I have a chance of getting away, and you'll get away yourself after sending a warning. You're going to be as much a suspect as I am if you're found here.' He had painted the picture in sombre colours deliberately, to make a test, to force Grant to think hard, and now he waited for Grant's reaction.

The moon rose higher in the sky, striking the upper storeys of the large blocks of flats on the far side of the road. Occasionally a car passed, its masked headlight bathing them with light.

Mannering said abruptly: 'What do you feel about it?'

'Oh, I'm in it all right,' said Grant quietly, 'but you've rather taken the wind out of my sails. I'd no idea you'd be up to anything like this.' He laughed, a little uncertainly. 'Have you had much practice?'

'Enough,' said Mannering. 'You said you remembered me from newspaper stories.'

He knew that Grant would soon be putting two and two together, would at least wonder whether he was the Baron. Sooner or later, too, Grant was likely to learn from Lucille that she had approached Mannering believing him to be the Baron. He did not think that Grant would betray him, was convinced that by inviting the man to play a part in the night's work he would ensure his loyalty. He needed assistance badly.

It was two years since he had forced an entry, except that at Grey House, and now there was the added danger of police

intervention. A man on guard would be invaluable.

His torch, cautiously flashed on the next gate, showed the dark lettering: 'Watchett'. He did not stop but went on to the adjoining house.

'We'll go in here, I think.'

He glanced up and down the hill, seeing only three people all walking away from them. There were no cars in sight, and the moonlight cast their side of the road in shadow.

There was a shrubbery on the side of the garden adjacent to 'Watchett', and beyond it a wooden fence no more than four feet high. Peering beyond, Mannering saw another shrubbery on the far side. One after the other they climbed over, tall shrubs and trees giving them all the cover they needed.

Grant's whisper was tense with excitement.

'How are you going? Back or front?'

'Back, probably,' said Mannering. They stood on the unkempt lawn, then approached the front of the house which stood stark and clear against the rapidly lightening sky, yet was surrounded by shadows because of the shrubs and trees growing close to it. Mannering murmured, 'Wait here while I look round. If there's any sign of people coming in, give a high-pitched whistle.'

'Right!' said Grant briskly. 'Don't worry, I'll keep you covered.'

Mannering hid a smile as he left the younger man. He was wearing rubber-soled shoes, more of Leverson's 'props', which made little sound on the gravel and none on the grass verge. Rounding the side of the house he saw a tree with widespread branches stretching almost to the first-floor windows of the house. He marked it as a possible form of entry. He walked on, to the back door, peering close to a window to see any glow or crack of light. There was none.

He kept quite still, listening intently, hearing nothing.

He found that the door was locked. Unfastening the tool-kit from his waist, he took out a long bradawl. He pushed it through the keyhole, and it touched metal.

'Key in lock,' mused Mannering. 'I hope this isn't going to be too easy.'

He disliked simplicity, knowing that there was always a chance of clever deception, remembering that Leverson had warned him that Penrose was cunning and crafty.

He took another tool from the kit, a small-bladed, steel implement made on the forceps principle, with thin steel so strong that it could work its way about the end of a key in a lock and, when gripped, exert enough pressure for the key to be turned from the opposite side.

This the Baron gently inserted.

As cautiously he turned it. The tool gripped, the key slowly revolved, and there was a quiet click as the lock itself went back. Mannering stopped quickly, waiting to catch the slightest sound; none came.

He pulled a knotted handkerchief high over the lower part of his face, but before he attempted to open the door he inserted another tool, a thin screw-driver, into the small gap between the door and frame. This he drew along the top, then down the full length of the door and along the bottom. Once or twice he touched small obstacles, but always they gave way; certainly he did not find an alarm wire which the opening of the door would set into operation.

That precaution taken, he opened the door.

The room was in darkness but the moonlight showed him that he was in a scullery.

The Baron closed the outer door, then stepped through into a kitchen. Two easy chairs were drawn up in front of a fireplace where the embers were glowing red.

A door faced him. He went through to the passage beyond, approaching what he judged to be the hall. Here a light glowed dully from a high chandelier.

There were several doors leading from the hall, and the staircase was unexpectedly narrow with a passage on either side. He saw no light from any of the rooms, and went softly to the front door.

It was bolted as well as locked.

The bolts were well oiled. He pulled them back, then turned the key. The door opened noiselessly.

He saw nothing, and there was no sound as he reached the porch. He hesitated, then walked towards the shrubs on his left. Grant's figure loomed up at him, the pale blur of his face just visible.

'Did you come from inside?' Grant whispered.

'Yes, I found an easy door.'

'You're incredible!' exclaimed Grant. 'I thought you'd still be looking round. Found anything?'

'I haven't looked yet. Is everything all right here?'

'Not a sound or sign of trouble.'

'Good, but keep an eye open for the servants who may be out. If they are, they'll probably come in at the side gate.'

'How long are you going to be?'

'I'm not sure. Half an hour should see it through,' Mannering said.

He returned to the house, quite reassured. No one would have seen Grant unless they had been looking for him; the youngster was obeying instructions to the letter.

Back in the hall Mannering stood listening for a moment. A faint drone of traffic filtered in from the road, but there was no other sound. He approached the doors on the right, opening them in turn and finding the rooms in darkness, as were those on the other side.

Quickly he went upstairs.

Lucille had told him that Penrose's room was the first on the right, along the wider of two passages from the landing.

Mannering reached it, trying the handle and finding that it moved easily. He pushed against the door but it did not move.

He pushed again, and this time the door moved, but so slightly that he came to the conclusion that it was padded and probably soundproof. He put his ear against the crack, and for the first time he heard men speaking.

An old voice, cracked and venomous, was saying: 'There is no doubt about it, no doubt at all. The girl lied to me.'

Someone said: 'What makes you so sure?'

'Are you suggesting that I do not know when I am hearing the truth or not?' demanded the old man, and Mannering

recalled Lucille's description of Penrose's voice, and recognised by that description its queer, shrill note.

The voice which answered he did not recognise.

'I don't think so, she told a straightforward story. I suppose'—a pause—'you're not lying, Penrose?'

Penrose said contemptuously, 'Lying? To you? I have no idea where the Collection is, but I think the Drake woman lied, I think she knows.'

'We're not going to get any farther by arguing about it,' said the second man, and Mannering's body tensed, for the voice, growing deeper, held a metallic note which he recognised for the first time; Mortimer had kept the appointment. 'We can be pretty sure that Grant knew who had the stuff.'

'Yes,' said Penrose softly. 'A great tragedy, that of our friend Grant, a great tragedy. Do you think that he was trying to double-cross you? Forgive the use of so coarse a word, but it expresses so exactly what I mean.'

Mortimer said: 'Grant wouldn't try that on with Netley and I, we knew too much about him.'

'Ah,' said Penrose softy. 'You show a remarkable faith, my friend. My experience is that for a prize so great as the Collection no man will set aside a chance of getting everything for himself. Mortimer, tell me, who do you think killed Grant? Supposing the police knew that you were working with him, supposing they knew that you discovered he was trying to double-cross you, what do you think they would imagine? That you killed him, perhaps?'

Mortimer snapped: 'What are you trying to say?'

'Nothing, my friend, nothing that is not pertinent to the affair. I am asking you if you are aware that you could be suspected of his murder?'

'I was nowhere near Grant's place at the time,' Mortimer said harshly.

Penrose laughed.

'That is a poor lie, Mortimer, unworthy of you, although it might suffice for the police. I know differently, my friend. As it happens, I had a man watching the office. He saw you go up

those narrow back stairs, not an hour before Grant was killed. Unfortunately he did not see you come back. It is lucky indeed for you that I am not friendly with the police, eh?'

Mannering widened the door a full three inches, convinced that the others were too intent on their conversation to notice it. At the same time, very faintly on the air, a thin, high whistle came to him.

Grant was sending his warning signal.

Chapter Eighteen

Three Together

Mannering acted instinctively.

He slipped into a room nearby and crouched behind the door.

Almost at once came a heavy knock from the porch. A pause, and it came again.

A sound came from the passage, and he saw an old man slowly emerge from the door he had just left. His face was wrinkled and evil, and a red fez sitting askew above it did nothing to lessen this effect.

Mortimer came into sight, his expression definitely worried.

'Who can it be?'

'Who else, my friend, than Netley?' demanded Penrose. 'I thought it an excellent idea to see you both together.' He laughed again, then went at surprising speed towards the head of the stairs.

Mannering could hear his feet, encased in carpet slippers, flapping across the hall. Reaching the door, he stopped abruptly and his manner changed; that was evident even at a distance.

Mannering knew what he had seen; the bolts were drawn, the door unlocked.

After a long pause Penrose opened it, disclosing Netley's tall, thin frame.

Penrose locked and bolted the front door, then followed Netley, who pulled up short when he saw Mortimer, snapping: 'What's this?'

'Never mind that,' said Penrose harshly. 'Someone is in this house, someone with no right here. I bolted the door myself, and it was unbolted when I went down. Do you see what that means?' he demanded. 'Do you? We may have been overheard,

Mortimer, and both of you may be known to be here.'

The three men made a vivid tableau against the light from the room. Netley's face was twisted in alarm and apprehension, Mortimer's grew set; he was the more likely to face danger with equanimity. Penrose had his back to Mannering, who slid his right hand into his pocket and withdrew it, holding a gun.

It was not loaded, but the others would not know that; and there would be no second chance of getting them altogether and so completely at his mercy.

'It's a lie!' Netley exclaimed. 'You're trying to frighten me, Penrose!'

'Shut your ruddy trap!' barked Mortimer. 'Pen—'

He stopped abruptly, for the Baron stepped into the passage, his gun raised.

Penrose swung round as if knowing from Mortimer's expression that there was a new danger.

'Good evening to you,' said the Baron sardonically.

Young Grant would not have recognised his voice, but Mortimer did, and Netley's protruding eyes stood further from his head. Penrose made no effort to move and Mortimer spoke in a slow, bewildered voice: 'My God, it's the soldier!'

'Your memory does you credit,' the Baron said. 'I hope your discretion is as great. Back into the room, all of you, and keep in sight. If one of you tries to dodge I shall shoot.'

Mannering, following them into the room, saw the large roll-top desk of which Lucille had talked, the heavy, old-fashioned office furniture.

'Sit down, all of you,' ordered the Baron.

Since Mortimer's exclamation none of them had spoken.

They sat on chairs about the big desk.

They were waiting for the Baron to speak. He said slowly; 'I followed you, Mortimer. Does that mean anything?' Mortimer's tongue ran along his lips, Penrose stared at him; it was easy to imagine the hatred in the old man's mind, to know that they believed what he said.

'Apparently not,' said the Baron musingly. 'It means that I

was coming to see you to discuss last night's Grey House bargain. I didn't expect to find you crazy enough to come to this rat's house. Do you know Penrose is the biggest shyster in the business, the crookedest fence this side of Berlin? Did you know that the police are always after him and that anyone who comes here is suspect? How friendly are the police going to be when they know you've seen Penrose, on top of Grant's murder? If they doubted your guilt before they'll be damned sure now that you had a part in it. Bristow means to get a conviction for the Grant job.'

Netley was breathing heavily, his breath catching sometimes in his throat with an odd gurgling note. Mortimer's hands were clenched on the arms of his chair. Penrose appeared to shrink into himself and grow smaller. A grotesque figure, but dangerous; Mannering was not sure how dangerous, yet everything about Penrose warned him that Leverson had been right. Penrose said in a rasping voice: 'Mortimer, who is this?'

Mortimer drew a deep breath. 'The man we told you about at Grey House.'

'So-o,' said Penrose. 'The soldier with the interest in jewels. Also a man with a careless tongue, who will regret it. Get out of my house!'

'Don't rant,' the Baron said equably. 'Mortimer, you've fallen for the old blackguard's bait so easily I don't think there's much hope for you. He wanted you here, he wanted you suspected. He's after the Collection and he's afraid you'll get it, so he wants the police to keep you under cover.'

'That's a lie!' gasped Netley, 'it can't be true!'

'It is true,' said Mannering. 'He's all set now to drop a hint to the police, nor is he above faking a witness to swear that you were seen.'

Penrose snarled: 'Get out while you can!'

The Baron leaned forward, gripping the front of the old man's coat, while still keeping the others covered with the empty gun. 'I'll have the truth out of you or I'll leave you as dead as Grant. You killed him, you learned where he had the jewels, and you put him out. Now you've covered yourself with

Mortimer and Netley. That's it, isn't it?'

He flung the man back into the chair.

It did Penrose no physical harm, but he saw fit to lean back with his eyes closed, his breath coming in wheezing gasps.

'What are we going to do?' Netley screeched. 'Don't sit there saying nothing, Mortimer, what are we going to do?'

Mortimer said: 'Keep quiet.' He looked at the Baron, his eyes narrowed. 'How much of that is really true?'

'All of it if Penrose runs true to form,' the Baron said sharply. 'What bargain did you strike with him?'

Netley said: 'I won't be silenced like that, Mortimer! Our part is innocent enough. Penrose told us he had a chance of acquiring some of the Durand Collection. We wanted to buy, so we asked him to let us give the first offer. He told us he was working through the Drake girl. She came to Mortimer for help, and then Penrose got in touch with her again. She was going to get one of the jewels to show earnest, but she didn't get it.'

'Penrose says she lied,' Mortimer said.

'Ye-es, I heard him,' murmured the Baron.

Lucille's part as Leonora was now fully explained. She had intended to get the interest of Mortimer and his friends as well as Penrose, had set one against the other while each believed her a tool in his hands.

Now that he had the story and believed there was nothing of importance to follow, he felt a curious sense of deflation.

It was straightforward and reasonable. Penrose had heard that the Collection was in England, just as Leverson had. Probably every fence of importance in the country knew; the grapevine service amongst buyers and sellers of stolen jewels was unrivalled.

Penrose had seen a chance of getting a share, had sent for Lucille believing her to be Leonora Drake, learned of her approach to Mortimer and the others, and acted accordingly. Garstang had taken the Tear which she had promised Penrose she would try to get.

But there must be more in it than that.

Deliberately he had flung accusations at Penrose. His only

object had been to make the atmosphere strained, knowing that when their suspicions of one another were heightened they would be more likely to tell the truth.

Penrose's object in trying to blackmail them was surely crystal clear; he wanted control of them if they found the jewels. Penrose was sitting up and clearing his throat. His eyes opened and closed like an owl's when faced with bright light.

There was that much in common between Baptiste and Penrose; their appearance was disturbing.

Baptiste – and Penrose. Was there a stronger connection than that?

Mannering demanded suddenly: 'Penrose, did your man see Mortimer at Grant's shop?'

Penrose cracked: 'Get out of my house.'

'You'll change your tune,' said the Baron harshly. 'The police arrested Leonora Drake tonight. She told them of her arrangement with you, they broke down her resistance. She didn't name you but the description was good enough and the police will be here before the night's out. Do you want them to find you here?'

Penrose's claw-like hands moved up and down his coat lapels.

'Is that true?'

'Don't waste time. I've told you it is.'

Penrose gasped: 'I—I must get away. You wouldn't keep an old man here, you wouldn't let the police get an old man before he can prepare his defence, before he can prove that the girl was lying!'

Mannering said coldly: 'If I get your story you can have a break.' He looked hard at Mortimer and Netley. 'I gave you a chance to get away once before. Here's another. I'll deal with Penrose on my own.'

Netley moved towards the door.

Mortimer said: 'Just a minute.' His eyes were puzzled, his words were hesitant. 'Why are you looking after us like this?'

'Not for your sweet sakes,' snapped the Baron. 'You'll learn, in time. Get out while the going's good. Penrose, where's the

key of this door?'

Penrose put a hand to his coat pocket.

For a moment Mannering waited on edge, knowing he had given the fence a chance of shooting if he had a weapon, that if Penrose fired from his pocket there would be little hope of evading the bullet.

Penrose pulled out a key.

'Throw it to my chair,' the Baron ordered.

Penrose obeyed, and Mannering groped for the key with his left hand, then motioned Mortimer and Netley to the door. They went through one after the other.

Mannering slipped the key in the lock, turned it, then put it in his pocket.

He looked coldly at Penrose. 'How much more do you know?'

'Nothing, nothing more! You were right, I wished to have evidence against Netley and Mortimer, I was prepared to fake it. You do not know them as I do, they are tricksters and cheats, they would not act fairly with me. You have misjudged me, my friend, I swear that you have.'

'It could be,' said Mannering without conviction. 'On the other hand, Penrose, I'm a friend of Leonora Drake. I mean to find her.'

Mannering took a scarf from his neck and bound it about Penrose's face, not tightly but enough to make him helpless; then he took a coil of cord from his waistband kit and tied Penrose's hands together.

Satisfied he could neither shout nor see, Mannering turned to the desk.

Penrose kept quite still.

Mannering went swiftly through the drawers.

In one of them he found a loose-leaf book. There was nothing else in the drawer, and the key was in the lock. A glance told Mannering that the lock was exceptionally complicated, that few cracksmen could have forced it, and that Penrose had taken exceptional precautions with that drawer and its contents.

He opened the book at the last page and read: Grant,

Mortimer and Netley will be calling between nine o'clock and ten.

He glanced at other pages, seeing the names of Netley, Mortimer and Grant, as well as Leonora's. He saw also those of Garstang, Baptiste, Bristow, and one which made him draw in a sharp breath: it was his own.

He did not attempt to read the notes, but slipped the book into his capacious pocket.

Penrose was not moving. Mannering made sure that he was alive and not too uncomfortable, then unlocked the door and hurried downstairs.

He gave a low whistle, but there was no answer.

He called again, advancing towards the shrubbery where Grant had been waiting.

There was no trace of him.

He went to the shrubs on the other side, calling the youngster's name softly, but there was no response.

Puzzled and worried, he returned to the house and closed the front door. There might be much more to learn from Penrose's room, and he was not likely to have another opportunity. He was uneasy, for there was no further chance of being warned of approach, and he wondered whether he had overplayed his hand, whether the police would visit Penrose – not because they knew of the man's part in the mystery, but because they might have followed Mortimer and Netley.

Back in the study he locked the door, put out the light, and stepped to the window. He drew the curtains then exclaimed sharply, for it was protected by iron bars. There was no way of escape there.

He had planned an emergency getaway from the window, but knew then that he would have to rely on one of the doors.

His disquiet increased, but he refused to let himself be flustered or to stop in his search. He stepped to Penrose and ran through his pockets. The man did not stir.

Mannering found a bunch of keys.

He had seen the wall-safe when he had first entered the room, but had left examining it until the last. He had no idea

what he might find there, but his hopes were high.

The sixth key fitted, and turned in the lock.

The door opened, revealing an inner door, also with a keyhole.

He tried again, this time finding the key he wanted at the fourth attempt.

As it turned, Mannering moved sharply aside. There followed a sharp hiss and a whitish vapour billowed into the room.

He held his breath and drew back, an acrid smell in his nostrils.

The white cloud dispersed slowly, but his eyes were watering and he felt an increasing soreness at his mouth and nostrils.

But there was no time to relax. A clattering, ringing sound echoed about the house so loud that it made him stand still abruptly, listening and straining to catch any movement made under cover of the clangour.

Presently it grew less noisy, and faded away.

The following silence was absolute. Mannering decided that Penrose's precautions had ended; the white vapour was tear-gas, the din a burglar alarm.

Tears were streaming down Mannering's face as he returned to the safe.

It was surprisingly large inside, a dark recess stretching a foot or more on either side. Mannering shone his torch into it, seeing jewel cases piled high. He drew one out, hesitated, then removed them all. There were twenty-three.

Mannering surveyed the pile, his eyes narrowed, his lips pursed. He picked one up and slowly opened it.

With a catch of his breath he saw that the necklace before him was of diamonds. But it was more than their beauty which startled him.

He lifted the necklace so that it shimmered beneath the light, dazzling him. He examined it closely, then put it down and opened a second case. In this he found a tiara, not large in itself, but of superb stones. He recognised it as well as the necklace, knew that they were pieces of the Antoinette jewels of which he had already seen two of the Tears. He had found the Durand

Collection.

Chapter Nineteen

News For Lucille

Mannering replaced the tiara and the necklace, then looked about the room for the right-sized receptacle. He found it in a small fibre suitcase.

He did not mean to leave a single gem for the police or others to find, although he had not yet decided what best to do with them.

With the suitcase full, he approached Penrose and pulled the scarf away. He was not quite sure what to do with him. Hesitating for a moment he slid a hand into the man's pocket. There was a wallet in it holding several cards. On one of them was engraved Penrose's name, the Putney address, and in pencil: 73 Carlton Street, Chelsea, S.W.

Mannering pointed to the pencilled address, and inquired sharply: 'Are you known there by the police?'

Penrose shook his head, while Mannering decided that it would be policy to give the man a chance of going. He did not want to lose sight of him entirely until he had heard the full story. But one thing was certain; Penrose would not disappear while he thought there was a chance of regaining the jewels.

He cut the cords at wrists and ankles, then with the case in his left hand and the empty automatic in his right, backed from the room.

He hurried down the stairs, intent on getting out of the house before he'd played his luck too far.

Opening the front door cautiously, he stepped into the porch.

Nothing stirred.

Mannering pulled the door behind him and hurried across the lawn. No further sounds reached him, and he saw no one at first, then as he reached the gates he spotted a man peering

towards him from the opposite side of the road.

His heart nearly turned over.

He did not stop, but walked on at a sharp pace. The man opposite followed him; and he saw that it was a policeman in uniform. At first Mannering tried to persuade himself that the man was on ordinary beat duty, but the steady footsteps quickened. Abruptly the man crossed the road, then turned and met Mannering.

'Just a moment there, please.'

Mannering resisted a temptation to strike him and run, was acutely conscious of the weight of the jewels in the case. An explanation of the encounter, that the man had heard the alarm bell while passing, was running through his mind, and the constable's first words seemed to confirm it.

'You don't live at "Watchett".'

'I beg your pardon,' said Mannering sharply.

'You heard me,' said the constable. 'What were you doing at that house?'

'I'm afraid I don't understand you,' Mannering said. 'I am a friend of Mr. Penrose.'

'A friend, are you,' the man said heavily. 'All right, sir. You won't mind me having a look in your case then, will you?'

'Of course not, constable,' Mannering said promptly. He bent down, fumbling with the catches.

'It's always a nuisance,' he added testily. 'Let me take it to that gate and I can rest it on one of the bars.' He raised the case to the top of the gate, actually unfastened the clasp and began to open it. The policeman brought his flashlight to bear on the jewel boxes, and in the moment Mannering, who had put his hand in his pocket as if for a handkerchief, withdrew it, holding an automatic by the barrel.

He moved swiftly, striking the man on the nape of the neck with sufficient force to pitch him forward. If not unconscious the man would be dazed for some minutes. Quickly he dragged him into the garden, pushing him well out of sight behind a clump of shrubs. Then, retrieving the case, he hurried down the hill and on to the station.

It was a little past eleven, and there was no likelihood that the last train had gone.

Mannering booked to Waterloo and learnt that there was a train due in at that moment.

With a sigh of relief Mannering leapt into a darkened carriage. A desultory conversation was going on between two corner-seat passengers. Mannering joined in with easy affability, after putting his case on the luggage rack above his head.

At Clapham Junction he alighted, finding his way to the exit without trouble, although on edge lest it were watched. The man who took his ticket gave him a protracted stare but said nothing.

Mannering walked towards Clapham High Street, and from there took a bus. He was more nervous than he cared to admit, and it was not until he reached Trafalgar Square that he began to breathe freely.

He went to a hotel in Villiers Street, booking a double room under the name of Morris, and saying that his wife would join him later. Leaving the case there, he went out again, hearing Big Ben striking midnight as he reached the Strand. Few people were about, and the row of telephone kiosks beneath the subway of Trafalgar Square Station was deserted.

He rang Leverson first, using his natural voice.

'Everything all right?' Leverson could not conceal his anxiety.

'So far, yes. No one's been to see you?'

'No, but the house is watched,' said Leverson. 'You'd better not come here. I'll get your clothes to Harry's.'

'Good man,' said Mannering. 'I'll call you again when I can.'

'Anything I can do?'

'I'm not sure,' said Mannering, 'but yes, there is – think up a place where I can deposit some oddments for a day or two.'

Leverson said sharply: 'You haven't got them?'

'Yes,' said Mannering, and heard Leverson exclaim again, 'but I can't stop now. How safe is Harry's place tonight?'

'You probably won't get in until ten o'clock tomorrow,' said Leverson. 'Harry's ill, and he's short-staffed. Can you manage?'

‘Oh yes,’ said Mannering, more cheerfully than he felt.

He replaced the receiver, waited a few seconds, then dialled Lorna’s number.

She answered so promptly that he knew she had been waiting on edge for his call. He realised with a shock that it was Thursday. He forced the thought aside but it depressed him; there seemed no chance of keeping the appointment with the Registrar.

‘John?’ Lorna said sharply.

‘All safe and sound,’ Mannering said. ‘I don’t know when I’ll be back, but—’

‘Just a minute!’ Lorna said urgently. ‘Charles Grant is here, he says he must have a word with you.’

At the urgency in Lorna’s voice Mannering was filled with a new sense of apprehension. He waited in sharp expectancy for Grant to speak.

‘Mannering, I followed Mortimer and Netley from that house,’ Grant said excitedly. ‘They went to Mortimer’s place, and then on to Scotland Yard. As far as I know they’re still there.’

‘Scotland Yard!’ exclaimed Mannering. ‘Are you sure, Grant?’

‘Of course I’m sure! But why the devil should they go there?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Mannering slowly, ‘but it could be they had the wind up and decided to get in first. Not a bad move, if they’re smart enough to do it well. I think Mortimer is.’ His mind was busy with possible developments from Mortimer’s latest trick, aware that the one problem for him was to keep clear of the police until he had made sure there was no possible evidence that he had been to Putney and taken the Collection.

‘You don’t seem particularly worried,’ Grant’s voice was slightly aggrieved.

‘I’m not, yet.’

‘Well, that’s good,’ said Grant a little stiffly. ‘Just a moment, Miss Fauntley wants a word with you again.’ After a pause, Lorna asked quietly: ‘Darling, dare I say anything about tomorrow? Two o’clock is hopeless? Just tell me in so many words so that I can stop kidding myself.’

Something stiffened in Mannering's mind, confusion dispersed and one issue came clear.

'Damn it, no,' he said. 'Two o'clock, whether this affair is I over or not. Darling, I love you. I hope I'll have a lifetime to tell you that.'

'John, you're serious?' There was a sudden lilt in Lorna's voice.

'Never more so. Two o'clock on the dot,' said Mannering, and then added extravagantly, hoping to God it would come true: 'I think we'll be through the worst by then, Lucille should have her precious jewels, Bristow his murderer, and Grant his Leonora. Good-bye for now.'

He rang off and left the kiosk quickly.

Lucille would have her jewels, Bristow his murderer, and Grant his Leonora, he had said. At least the first was reasonable enough. Smiling, he went back to the hotel, his heart beating a trifle faster as he entered his room and looked towards the corner where he had left the case.

It was still there.

His breathing steadied as he locked the door, then telephoned the porter to call him at four-fifteen. Taking off his shoes and collar, he lay on the bed with only an eiderdown over him. For some time his mind roved over the events of the day and the possibilities of the morrow; then he dozed off.

He was awakened unceremoniously by a heavy banging on his door.

'Faw-fifteen, sir!'

With a muttered thanks, Mannering eased himself from the bed. He did not dare to wash, for fear of disturbing his makeup, but permitted himself three minutes of deep breathing in front of the open window before putting on his collar and tie.

Then he went out of the room, locking the door after him.

The porter was still deep in his paper novel.

Mannering told him portentously that he was meeting an early train, had left a case in his room, and would be back about eight o'clock. He would like his bill to be ready by then, in case he decided not to stay.

‘Okay,’ said the man, and went back to his reading.

Mannering shivered a little as he left the hotel.

The wind was strong and gusty as he turned into the Strand.

Without very much trouble he managed to get a taxi, and directed the cabby to drive to Chelsea Town Hall.

His mind was now working smoothly, and driving through the early morning traffic he formed a clear-cut plan ready for putting into operation. The obvious starting-point was Penrose, who must surely have more information than he had yet disclosed. The pencilled address might have been a ruse, but at least was well worth trying.

From Chelsea Town Hall he walked to Carlton Street.

He knew it for one of the narrow turnings off King’s Road, the houses, many of them converted into shops, dating back to the Regency.

Number 73 proved to be an antique shop of the residential variety. There was a small plaque bearing the words: ‘Champbourcy et Cie, London and Paris’.

Chapter Twenty

Leonora

There was no quick way to the rear of 73 Carlton Street other than the front door, no means of forcing entry except through one of the windows or the door itself.

Mannering examined the lock, and saw that it would take considerable forcing even if he could do it with one of the tools Leverson had lent him.

A more straightforward method was necessary, and he took a glass-cutter from his tool-kit. He paused before using it; glancing up and down the street. There were no sounds except the occasional hum of a distant car or lorry.

In his mind's eye were the words: 'Champbourcy et Cie, London and Paris'.

Carefully he drew the cutter down the window, using just sufficient pressure. A sharp squealing noise accompanied it. After each application he paused to listen, but there was no hint that anyone had been alerted. The street remained silent.

Mannering took up another tool, a fitted handle at one end, and a rubber suction cup at the other. He pressed the cup against the centre of the window before making the final cut at the bottom.

The glass sagged but the suction cup held it upright, preventing it from falling.

As he worked, the knowledge that this was a London branch of Champbourcy et Cie was running through his mind, with all it implied. The more he pondered the possibility that Champbourcy had been cheating Lucille the more likely that became. At the forefront of this thought was the one reminding him that Penrose would probably be expecting this call, even waiting for it.

Carefully Mannering lifted the sheet of glass out, resting it against the shop front. Then he put a hand inside the hole, fumbling for the handle of the door.

His sleeve touched something he could not see.

He paused immediately, discovering a thin piece of wire stretching the length of the door and knew it to be a burglar alarm which, once touched or cut, would set up a clangour such as he had caused at Putney.

He changed his tactics quickly.

Lifting the piece of glass he put it inside the shop, holding his breath in fear lest he should inadvertently touch the wire. Then he slithered through himself.

It was a nerve-racking few minutes, but he heard nothing until he was standing inside the shop, when the slow tread of a man approaching from the river end of the street made him go rigid.

He stood quickly to one side.

The newcomer was nearer than he had expected. He could see the glow of the man's torch. It was a policeman, coming to try the door.

Mannering held his breath and waited.

The constable put out a hand so close to the gap in the glass that it seemed to Mannering that he must realise there was a piece missing. Instead the man turned the handle, pushed, grunted, and moved away.

His shadow disappeared as quickly as it had arrived.

The Baron waited for several seconds before he dared touch the glass again. He did not mean to take more chances than were strictly necessary. He took a wide roll of adhesive tape from the tool-kit, and running it along the sides and top of the gap, gently pressed it against the piece he had removed.

The adhesive held.

With a sigh of relief the Baron turned his attention to a door at the far end of the shop. It was closed but not locked. He went through into a large room filled with antiques.

He made sure that the only window in the back room was blacked out, then felt secure enough to switch on the light. He

found another door, ajar, leading to a flight of stairs.

The silence in the building was unnerving, increasing his apprehension and the fear that his visit was observed.

He went into the passage.

It led alongside the stairs, past further rooms, and he explored them first. A kitchen, a scullery, and then a back door wired as effectively as the front had been.

Mannering examined it closely. It was of a kind with which he was familiar. Quietly, expertly, he put it out of action.

That done, the Baron breathed more evenly. He now had a way of escape.

He turned back to the stairs.

He wondered whether Penrose had actually come here, or whether he would find others whom he did not know upstairs. Near the top he stood quite still.

There was the sound of breathing, and it was coming from a door standing ajar.

The Baron approached it and entered softly. His torch spread a diffused glow which crept up to the head and shoulders of the sleeper, a big ill-featured man lying on his back.

Mannering moved towards him, one hand outstretched, fingers ready for action. The man stirred, turning over on his side.

The Baron moved again, his fingers closing on a sinewy windpipe. The man started up, then gradually his movements slackened and grew still.

Mannering waited until he was sure the other was unconscious before releasing his pressure.

It took him three minutes to bind the man securely.

The room was barely furnished, and there was no wall-safe. It was evident that the unconscious man was some kind of a caretaker.

Mannering left the room, looking into two others and seeing no sign of Penrose.

There was another flight of stairs, and these the Baron now mounted. He went up slowly, prepared for almost any eventuality.

He came to a narrow landing and two doors. He turned to the door on the right, tried it, and found it locked.

He examined the keyhole. There was no suggestion that it would prove difficult to force, and he used a skeleton key. A few seconds of manipulation sent the lock back with a click.

Mannering paused to make sure that it had disturbed no one, then turned the handle. At the same moment he heard a slight sound of movement within the room.

He opened the door another inch, a vision flashing across his mind of someone holding a gun towards the door.

He entered the room quickly, moving to one side.

He heard what might have been a gasp, nothing more, waited in the darkness for perhaps ten seconds, then stretched up, groping for the light switch. With a sudden movement he pressed it down.

The light was a blue one and very pale, so that at first he could hardly see about the room. When his eyes became accustomed to it he saw a girl half-sitting in a camp-bed. A handkerchief was tied about her mouth, and her body was bound to the bed by thick cord on the outside of her clothes.

Wide eyes stared at him, frightened and unwinking.

Mannering closed the door softly behind him and approached the bed. The girl shrunk back, but he spoke in a whisper which obviously reached her.

'Don't worry, you're all right now.'

It was Leonora, of course, it must be Leonora; and Penrose had imprisoned her here. Penrose was the thief, had known of all the arrangements and believed this girl to be Lucille. Mannering leaned forward and untied the scarf round the girl's mouth. His expression became grim when he saw the deep red marks at the corners of her mouth where the scarf had bitten tightly. She moved her lips but they were too stiff for her to form words. He turned to the cords at her waist and wrists, and cut them through.

They had been tied so tightly that her arms were swollen and ridged.

He massaged them gently, speaking to her all the time. ‘Don’t try to talk yet, you’ll be all right.’ Presently he said: ‘You’re Leonora Drake, aren’t you?’ She nodded, tried to speak, failed, tried again. ‘Thank—thank God you’ve come.’

‘You’re all right,’ said Mannering gently. ‘Don’t try to talk.’

It was twenty minutes before Mannering thought it wise to help her from the bed. She stood upright but swayed uncertainly, and he held her by the shoulders as she walked across the boarded floor in stockinged feet. After five minutes she was able to walk on her own, and when Mannering felt confident that she could descend the stairs with his help he said: ‘How many men have you seen here?’

‘Two.’

‘A big man?’

‘Yes. And—a very old one.’

The caretaker, thought Mannering, and Penrose. Aloud: ‘Has Baptiste been here?’

‘Not—for nearly—a week.’

‘Don’t worry about Baptiste,’ said Mannering, ‘the police have him. Now listen, Leonora. We’re leaving here quickly. You could manage the stairs with my help, but it would take too long, so I’m going to carry you.’

He lifted her up and began the descent, not easily, for the stairs were narrow. He knew that the odds were that the house was empty but for them and the unconscious man, yet could not understand why Penrose had done nothing at all to receive him. Penrose might have been so frightened that he had made off to another address, deciding that was wiser than risking a second encounter, but to Mannering it seemed more likely that Penrose would have one main objective – to get the jewels back.

Mannering had left a light burning in the hall. He was not concerned about immediate danger, although the complete success of the exploit was oddly disturbing. Nothing had gone wrong, there had been no single mistake, no threat except the accidental appearance of the policeman.

He went through into the kitchen, leaving Leonora by the stairs. He had seen a bottle of milk standing on the table, and

half filling a cup with it he took it back to her.

She drank greedily and gratefully.

Mannering opened the back door, shepherding the girl into a small garden. At the end of it he could see a fence and a narrow gate. He opened this and stepped into a service alley. From there they reached Carlton Street itself.

It was going too well, Mannering thought insistently, much too well.

His mind was searching for the thing that had gone wrong without him knowing it, for the error which must surely reveal itself. He had gone to Penrose's other address, found that it was Champbourcy's, and discovered Leonora Drake; that made more than a coincidence. It was unreasonable that it had gone so smoothly.

By the time they reached King's Road the dawn was breaking. A bus lumbered up, and Mannering helped Leonora on to it.

When he reached the Villiers Hotel the night porter had been replaced by a man in a commissionaire's uniform, although it was only a little past half-past six. Mannering went up to him.

'My wife has just come off a long journey. Do you think it possible that we could have a little refreshment? I know it's too early for breakfast, but—' He paused, hopefully.

'I kin send up some tea an' biscuits, sir. What room please?'

'Room 41,' said Mannering. 'Mr. and Mrs. Morris.'

He turned to the lift, and a few moments later they entered the bedroom. The case was still there.

He said: 'After a cup of tea you'll probably feel more like talking. The bathroom's next door.'

Leonora murmured, her voice still hoarse and broken: 'I—I can't thank—'

'Don't try,' said Mannering.

When the tea arrived, Leonora was sitting back in an easy chair. She drank thirstily, but hardly touched the food. Mannering guessed that she was intrigued by his appearance, which was so unlike the Mannering she might eventually come to know.

Then she said: ‘You must know how thankful I am. But—who are you? How did you know I would be there?’

‘My name doesn’t matter,’ said Mannering, watching for the effect of his words. Tm helping your friend Lucille.’

‘Bless her!’ said Leonora fervently. ‘I knew she’d try to help me, she was always so good. So good,’ she repeated, and tears loomed in her eyes. ‘And the jewels?’

‘Safe,’ said Mannering.

‘Thank God for that! I knew the old man had them, he—oh, I hate to think about it!’ She stood up restlessly, and walked the length of the room. ‘It’s been a nightmare. I wonder—’

She stopped abruptly.

There was a tap at the door. Startled, Mannering held up a hand to enjoin silence, and then called: ‘Who is that?’

He looked towards the door as he spoke, seeing the handle turning slowly. He knew then that his disquiet had been well-founded. He had been followed, and this was the attempt that Penrose would make to get back the jewels. He put his hand to his pocket and the gun, waiting for the right opportunity.

‘The porter, sir,’ a voice said. ‘Come for the cups, sir.’

‘We haven’t finished,’ said Mannering sharply.

‘Yes, we have,’ said Leonora softly, and Mannering turned to find himself looking into the muzzle of an automatic held steadily in the girl’s hand. ‘If you take your gun out I’ll shoot. Come in,’ she added in a louder voice, ‘it’s all right.’

Penrose and a small slim man entered quickly.

Chapter Twenty-One

Leonora Goes Wild

Mannering stared at Leonora Drake, conscious of a sickening sense of failure, and the knowledge that he should have been prepared for a trick so simple and so successful. Penrose said: 'So, my gallant friend, we have you fooled. Excellent work, Leonora, excellent indeed.'

Mannering said harshly: 'Don't talk too soon, Penrose.'

'Too soon, my dear fellow? Indeed, barely soon enough. We have worked swiftly but we still have to get away from here, for thanks to your foolish approach to the police they are searching for me. Leonora, leave the gentleman to Fred and look into the case, just to make sure that it does contain the jewels.'

The girl turned to the case and opened it.

Was she really Leonora? Assuming that she was, Mannering reasoned, she must have been working with Penrose from the beginning. Penrose had believed the Baron would go to the Carlton Street shop and had planted the girl there, knowing the Baron would take her away. Leonora's task had been to find the jewels, and it was he who had made the task easy for her. That was it – no, he was dreaming. Penrose had believed Lucille to be Leonora.

Leonora said in a sharper, exultant voice: 'They're all here – twenty-three cases.'

'Excellent indeed!' purred Penrose. 'I cannot tell you how pleased I am with you. And to think'—he leered at Mannering —'that I was foolish enough to confuse her with Lucille. You understand, now, Leonora has often worked for me, but I did not know her in person. She had much difficulty in convincing me that she was indeed Leonora and not Lucille Durand. How clever Lucille was! But not quite clever enough.' Penrose

paused, then added: ‘The book, yes, the book.’

Mannering had to let him take the loose-leaf book he had found, but so far only cursorily examined, and the eerie laugh followed.

‘Wonderful! And all intact. Have you read it, my friend? Do you know that I employed Garstang and Baptiste, Larramy and West; I toyed with Mortimer and Netley; I arranged for Champbourcy to leave France with the jewels? A complete success, complicated perhaps, but I had to protect myself. I doubt whether you would have found me but for Lucille. You didn’t follow Mortimer. I know that. You lied, you learned of my address from Lucille. Did she tell the police?’

Penrose paused, shaken by a sudden fury.

‘No, she did not tell the police, she was too frightened. She told Mannering. Mannering! I know you, I know you!’

There was a short tense pause, and then the girl said: ‘Ought we to stay here?’

Penrose started, the glitter fading from his eyes.

‘Of course. How right you are. Now, Mannering, the time has come for you to be silenced. Not killed – quite. Still, you are no stranger to violence – against others, that is.’

Mannering said: ‘I hate to thwart you yet again, but I’m still holding my gun.’

Penrose snapped: ‘You wouldn’t be such a fool as to fire!’

‘Fool or not,’ said Mannering. ‘I’ll fire if you haven’t left the room in three minutes.’ It was a desperate bluff with the empty gun but he had to try it.

The man named Fred said harshly: ‘Take yer ‘and out’ve yer pocket.’

‘You might be able to fire first,’ Mannering said, ‘but I doubt it. Checkmate, Penrose, I think. Any noise will be enough to attract attention.’

The door opened silently, and a hoarse voice rasped: ‘Make it snappy, Boss. The dicks is coming.’

The girl swung round, carrying the case.

Mannering drew a deep breath and stood up. Fred fired at him then, aiming wildly.

The bullet shattered a mirror, and Mannering ducked beneath the bed, where a second bullet buried itself. He saw Leonora's feet moving and the case going through the door. She was out of sight, hidden by the bed, a moment later.

Penrose was uttering orders in a sharp, high-pitched voice: 'The back stairs, take the back stairs.'

The girl had gone into the passage with Penrose in her wake, and Fred stretched out a hand to close the door.

Mannering threw his gun towards the man's feet.

It struck home. He heard a gasp and a curse. Mannering stayed where he was long enough to see the other's automatic hit the carpet, then he rounded the bed.

He made a grab at the gun and rushed through the door. Penrose and the girl had nearly reached the stairs. Mannering fired, and Penrose fell heavily forward.

Mannering turned and hurried back to his room, catching a glimpse of Tring at the end of the passage. He closed the door and turned the key in the lock before stepping to the window.

He was in no danger of being caught with the jewels, but he dared not allow himself to be found here.

He heard voices raised outside the door, Tring saying: 'About here, he went in about here.'

There was a thudding on a nearby door, and an angry voice was raised, asking what the devil the noise was about.

Mannering pushed the window up.

His room was at the back of the hotel, and in front of his eyes was a vista of desolation, a large building destroyed by bombing the previous year and not yet fully cleared. Steel girders stretched towards the skies like futurist skeletons.

He could see one of them clearly.

His choice was simple; he had either to be taken or to reach the wall on the other side of the road, behind Villiers Street.

He dared not risk capture: the possibility of a fatal accident was the lesser of two evils.

The thudding on the door increased. It was only a matter of minutes before it broke down.

Mannering climbed out on to the window-sill.

Crouching on the sill he unwound the tool-kit from his waist, taking out a length of cord. On one knee, with the street yawning beneath him, he looped an end of the cord and tossed it towards the nearest window-sill. Beside it a grinning gargoyle faced the desolation.

The loop missed.

Mannering did not look down, not daring to let himself think of what would result if he lost his hold.

He tried again with the cord, seeing it fall over the gargoyle's head.

He pulled it tight.

The cord was not strong enough to bear his weight but would be tough enough to help him keep his balance if he did not put too much strain on it. He moved dangerously near the edge of the sill, pressing his right arm close against the wall and then leaning slowly forward, letting the tension on the cord increase, pulling it towards him as he went.

His right arm, raised and pressed so tightly against the wall, drew nearer to the gargoyle's head. He clenched his teeth and then let himself fall slowly, so that his hand rested on the face of the gargoyle.

He leaned against it, his feet pushing against the window-sill, the cord tight between the stone head and his left hand. He paused to regain his breath, then let all his weight fall slowly on to his one arm. The cord saved him from losing his balance, and with a quick movement he reached the other window, his feet on its sill, his right hand still hugging the leering head.

The leaning girder was no more than five feet away from him.

He could fall towards it and get his arms about it, then climb down, using the rivets still in position as stepping-places. There was nothing else he could attempt, and he went forward with deliberation.

There was a crash from inside the hotel.

He reached the girder, leaning forward still farther until he obtained a grip about the rusty steel.

He groped for purchase, found it, and paused on the girder,

looking behind him and seeing Tring outlined against the window of his room.

He began to climb down.

Soon he was on a level with what remained of the brick wall.

That was his only hope. It led to other broken walls, to the shells of several office buildings. Once he reached the ruins there was a chance that he could escape from the police and the crowd now gathering fast about the hotel. He put his feet down to the wall and released the girder, standing thirty feet above the street.

The wall was no more than nine inches wide.

He had no time to argue with himself, but walked along it as a tight-rope walker would, arms outstretched on either side of him and relying on his momentum to help him keep his balance.

If he could reach the other side swiftly enough his chance of freedom remained.

Twisted girders and piles of brickwork and masonry were about and below him, and with their help he was able to lower himself until the rubble gave beneath his weight and he lurched helplessly to one side.

He could not wait, but pressed on. There were gaping window frames and doorways piled high with masonry. He was able to reach one without trouble. There was now only twenty feet to go.

He climbed through the window into a deserted street and found it barricaded at both ends. He hesitated for a moment, trying to judge his direction, knowing that his best course would be to get into the gardens near the river and then to the embankment where he would be able to pick up a taxi.

He reached another street, limping badly, wincing each time his foot touched the ground.

Another narrow turning, and he found himself in Villiers Street, could see the crowd gathered about the hotel; it looked as if the police had formed a cordon. So many people were about that he did not greatly fear detection, and as a taxi appeared from the direction of the Underground Station he

raised a hand towards it with a weary sense of anti-climax.

The driver put on his brakes.

'Brook Street,' Mannering said, and climbed into the cab.

His head was reeling, his eyes were hot and prickly, his breath came in gulps, but he knew that he was safe so far. There was, however, another danger, a chance that the police would hurry to his flat.

Leverson's house was watched also, and Harry's 'Club' might not be open; and he could not go to Lorna's home. As he neared Brook Street he was searching his mind for another haven, one where he could safely go. Suddenly he uttered aloud: 'Grant's flat, of course!'

He leaned towards the driver, giving fresh instructions to the cabby, and ten minutes later he was limping along Grey Street, Bayswater, the fear of pursuit still heavy on his mind.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Bring In Mannering

Mannering saw no one in Grey Street.

The houses were tall, narrow and severe in line, grey-faced and sombre. There were no porches in which men could be hiding furtively.

Mannering entered the open doorway of the house, finding it divided into four flats. Number 21c, on the first floor, was the Grants'. He was glad of the banister rail on the way upstairs, and leaned heavily against the wall after he had pressed the bell.

There was a chance that a servant would answer, but it was Charles Grant who opened the door, and stood staring.

'Mannering!' He started forward, a hand outstretched.

'I'm all right,' Mannering said gruffly. 'Is there anyone else here?'

'No,' said Grant, 'but there'll be a couple of daily women at nine o'clock.'

'That'll give us time,' Mannering said. 'I've got to get out of these clothes in a hurry. Have you a spare uniform?'

Grant grinned. 'It'll be a tight fit.'

Mannering's answering grin was not of the humorous kind. 'Any chance of a bath and a cup of tea?'

'Right!' said Grant, and hurried into a kitchenette.

He put on a kettle before going into the bathroom and turning on the taps. The combined noise of the gas and the splashing water made conversation impossible.

Mannering wondered what the youngster would say when he learned of Leonora's duplicity. He himself was only just beginning to realise the thoroughness of it.

As he towelled, his mind grew brisker, facts slipped into a

clearer perspective. Two major questions remained unanswered: the complicity of Champbourcy, by no means certain despite the knowledge that he had not mentioned his Chelsea shop; and the identity of Grant's murderer.

'And the exact relationship between Penrose and Mortimer,' added Mannering aloud, 'including Netley and Grant.'

Young Grant put his head round the door.

'Did you call?' he asked.

'No,' said Mannering, 'but it's time I started to talk. Good man, thanks.' He finished towelling and put on a dressing-gown which Grant handed him.

Grant had tea ready in the lounge, and over the first cup Mannering began to talk, gathering momentum as Grant's interest quickened. Grant held his comments until hearing of the finding of the jewels, and then his restraint broke.

'You found them! Where are they now?'

'The last I saw of them Leonora was throwing them at Tring's head,' said Mannering absently, and started as he saw the astonishment in Grant's eyes. 'Oh damn!'

'Leonora Drake?' asked Grant tensely.

'Ye-es,' said Mannering. 'I'd meant to bring her in more gently, but I'm not really myself.' He finished the story and sat back.

He was concerned about Grant's reaction to Leonora's treachery, and surprised that the youngster did no more than frown, saying: 'So Leonora was with them all the time?'

'Don't tell me you thought so before,' implored Mannering. 'I've taken you and your ignorance on trust all along.'

Grant smiled constrainedly.

'We-ell, I didn't think that, Mannering, but – I suppose this sounds pretty crazy, but things have been crazy this past few hours. Leonora was an obsession yesterday morning, but now—' He shrugged. 'She doesn't seem to matter.'

'Oh,' said Mannering blankly.

He was startled. He had expected Grant to be worked up to a high pitch about Leonora, and he was prepared for indignant denials that she could be involved.

Grant coloured a little under his gaze.

'It seems pretty grim in the circumstances,' he said, 'but I can't get Lucille Durand out of my mind, Mannering. It's as if I had to have something to hold on to now, the murder was such a hell of a shock, and Lucille—' He stopped, raising a hand hopelessly. 'I don't really understand myself, but there it is. I can't get her out of my mind.'

Mannering said slowly: 'A worthy young man for Lucille.'

'What's that?'

'Oh, nothing,' said Mannering hastily, and plunged into the later part of the story, deliberately trying to take Grant's mind off the other problem, relieved at the way things were working out. Then he stopped and said abruptly: 'But I'm all kinds of a damned fool! Have you any packing paper here?'

Grant stared. 'What on earth for?'

'To get rid of the clothes I came in,' said Mannering hurriedly. 'If Bristow does think of coming here and finds me, it will mean a search.'

Grant said at once: 'All right, I'll pack 'em up.'

He collected them from the bedroom and made a good job of the parcel while Mannering put on his spare uniform. It was tight under the arms and a little short in the leg, but not noticeably a misfit.

'What shall I do with this stuff now?' Grant demanded.

Mannering addressed the parcel quickly to K. Morris, Esq., c/o The Villiers Hotel, Villiers Street, Strand. It was just past eight o'clock, and the post office would be open.

'Get it posted, if you will,' he said, 'and that'll be that.'

With relief Mannering watched him going along the street and disappear towards Queen's Road.

He returned, some twenty minutes later.

'That's that!' Grant said confidently. 'Away with the evidence, and you're all right.' He regarded Mannering silently for some moments, and then said slowly: 'Lucille told me what Gironde of Paris told her, and I realised that it was true after seeing you dolled up last night.'

'You did, did you,' said Mannering.

‘Oh, it’s all right with me,’ said Grant. ‘Good Lord, you’ve found the jewels and Leonora, what more do the police expect? Do you think Leonora knows who killed my father? Was it this fellow, Penrose, do you think?’

‘It could be,’ said Mannering. ‘If your father knew who had the jewels, Penrose is certainly Number One suspect. But did Penrose have the jewels when the murder was committed? I can’t imagine he’d had them long, he wouldn’t have kept them in his safe at Putney for more than a few hours.’

‘Damn it, why not?’

‘Because he’s a fence and the police know it, because directly there’s talk of stolen jewels the police make a call on likely fences and can get a search-warrant without difficulty. They might have missed Penrose, but he isn’t a man to take unnecessary chances. There’s another angle, too. Garstang was after them, with Baptiste. Garstang and Penrose worked together, and Garstang certainly wanted to find where the jewels had gone. When Lucille saw Penrose as Leonora he was well in the hunt. The assumption is that he had them only last evening, and not long before I saw him. He was seeing Mortimer and Netley then, aiming to put the fear of God into them—’

He broke off abruptly.

‘What’s the matter?’ snapped Grant.

‘I’m just beginning to see,’ said Mannering slowly. ‘Penrose had the Collection by then, and had to have a strong hand against the original thief to prevent any comeback. He was working up a good case against Mortimer, and—’

Grant snapped: ‘There’s something I forgot. Mortimer owns Grey House, Mannering. Lucille told me about that place.’

‘Does he?’ said Mannering slowly. ‘Does he, by George! But he went to the police with Netley, a point to remember. Penrose knew me by name, but he didn’t plant the faked jewels on me.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘Because had Penrose known, he couldn’t have resisted telling me tonight,’ said Mannering. ‘Your problem’s still there, so is mine. The man who had the jewels before Penrose not only

knew me, but believed I was the Baron. We can't get away from that,' he went on sharply. 'If it was Mortimer, he's been to the police in spite of it. Could that be to tell them that he knows that I was at Grey House and at Penrose's place? If it is he wouldn't find it hard to convince Bristow.'

Grant stared at him, tight-lipped. Mannering shrugged his shoulders, pulled himself to his feet and limped to the fireplace. Grant eyed him without speaking.

Mannering said harshly: 'That's the probable move, Grant, to cover himself Mortimer will need a scapegoat. Penrose will have told him that he thinks I'm the Baron, Netley will lie to the limit to keep himself in the clear. Faked evidence is good evidence unless the police know it's false, and this time it will support their own theory, and so they'll turn a blind eye towards Mortimer and Netley.'

'What the hell can you do?' demanded Grant, and then exploded: 'Damn it, Mannering, look what you've done already! You've recovered the jewels, you've given the police Penrose and his gang, Baptiste, Garstang, the whole crowd of them, and you've helped them close up the leakage into England from the Continent. They ought to be so damned thankful that—'

He broke off helplessly, and Mannering gave a humourless smile.

'The end doesn't justify the means, Grant, that's the official angle, and I've always known it.'

'It's so damnably unfair! You wouldn't be in this load of trouble at all, but for Champbourcy and Lucille. Look here, isn't there any way I can help? I haven't really thought about you, I've been so wound up by the fact that Dad was mixed up with Mortimer and these other crooks that its put me out of my stride.'

Mannering said slowly: 'You've been so wound up with the fact that your father was involved, yes. So have I, Grant. But supposing he wasn't?' He ignored Grant's exclamation and went on quickly: 'Lucille approached Mortimer, Netley and your father believing they would buy if she got the gems back, she tricked Penrose to try to help find the Collection. That means

Mortimer, Netley and your father believed at first that the business was the legal sale of gems. But Mortimer and Netley have been working with Penrose in the past. Your father didn't necessarily know; his name wasn't in the book Penrose was so anxious to get back. Supposing he discovered Mortimer and/or Netley were handling stolen jewels, and threatened to tell the police? That would give another motive for the murder. Penrose says his man saw Mortimer visit the shop, remember. Now supposing they swing their evidence round, and Penrose tells a different story – that all of them saw me go into the shop? That will give the police a murder charge against me and get Mortimer and Netley out of danger. It would explain their visit to the police. They've got to save their own necks somehow.'

Grant said in a low voice: 'It doesn't make it any better for you. But, Mannering, I've never believed Dad would deal in stolen jewels, it's absolutely false to his nature.'

Mannering said: 'Did he keep any records here?'

'What kind of records?'

'Books, especially loose-leaf books,' said Mannering. 'Look for one, will you?'

The telephone bell rang and he stepped to the instrument, lifting the receiver slowly.

'This is Mr. Grant's flat.'

'John.' It was Lorna, and he sensed the tension in her voice. 'Bristow's been here. He told me there was a general call out for you. I mustn't stay, there's a sergeant in the hall.'

She rang off abruptly, as Grant returned with a loose-leaf book in his hand.

'Who was that?' he asked.

'Lorna,' said Mannering. 'That book will do fine, thanks. Now I must hurry. I have to see Mortimer before Bristow pulls me in.'

About the time of that discussion Sir David Ffoulkes opened the door of Bristow's office at Scotland Yard, nodded brusquely and said: 'Well, Bristow?'

From his desk Bristow looked up with unprofessional excitement, while from a smaller desk in a corner Detective-

Sergeant Tring looked eagerly at the Assistant Commissioner.

'We haven't got him yet, sir,' said Bristow, 'but it's only a matter of time.' He stood up abruptly. 'Will you sit here?'

'No, I'm all right,' said Ffoulkes, leaning against the arm of a chair. 'So the call's gone out, has it? To bring Mannering in at all costs?' His smile was tense, and was reflected in a sudden shadow in Bristow's eyes. 'I must say I didn't think we'd get Mannering over a job like this, did you?'

'I knew he'd have to crack,' said Bristow.

'And about time,' said Tring, unexpectedly.

Ffoulkes gave him a sharp look.

'Come along to my room, Bristow,' he said, 'there are a few things I would like to discuss.'

The two men went out together, leaving Tring to scowl into space.

'Five years we've been trying to get him,' he mused savagely, 'five blasted years! He's dodged me so often I'm still a sergeant. If it wasn't for him—' Tring rubbed his nose thoughtfully, then began to frown. 'Blast it, I don't know that I'm not sorry! He asked me for a wedding present, and this is what he gets!'

In the Assistant Commissioner's office Bristow was saying: 'I don't see that he's got a chance, Mortimer and Netley identify him without any question as the man who was at Grey House, so we've got one case of forced entry definitely against him. The Drake girl swears it was Mannering who took the jewels to the hotel, Penrose says that the jewels were never at his Putney house but Mannering attacked him there. Mortimer's evidence proves that man was Mannering. There may not be a definite charge of theft but he's caught on everything else. Even,' Bristow added slowly, 'the Grant murder.'

'I don't like it,' Ffoulkes said quietly, 'I don't see Mannering as a murderer, and I don't think we'd make that charge stick even if we preferred it. Taken by and large, Bristow, the evidence against him is from six people – Mortimer to start with, Netley in support, Penrose, the Drake girl, and their two accomplices. We've got Penrose and the woman on charges of

being in possession of stolen jewels, and they're blaming Mannering for it to save themselves. We've got Lucille Durand's evidence that Mannering had promised to help in every way he could, which is prima facie evidence that he was after her jewels, though not necessarily for himself. You know, Bristow, there are complications.'

'They'll smooth out,' said Bristow. 'Mannering may evade some charges, but he can't dodge them all. All the same, it's not so good when you start thinking about it.' There was no longer excitement in Bristow's voice. 'What have we got so far, sir, apart from what you've outlined? Baptiste and Garstang, Larramy and West, all from Grey House, all connected with smuggling refugees and God-knows-who-else into the country. We've sealed up the leakage on the Dorset coast, thanks to Mannering. If he hadn't sent for us straight away, we wouldn't have known about it for some time. He called us as soon as Grant was found, he told us the truth about Lucille Durand. We jumped to her being Leonora Drake, he didn't give us that story. Lucille Durand is reliable, I think.' He paused and Ffoulkes nodded abruptly. 'And we've got her jewels,' Bristow added. 'Mannering did that. Did he take them in the first place, or did he really get them back?'

'You're simply admitting the complications, not clearing them up,' Ffoulkes said. 'And what is more, you're implying that Mannering's motives were sound all through.'

'Well, yes,' said Bristow. 'I'm beginning to think they might have been.' Abruptly: 'Did you know he was planning to get married today?'

Ffoulkes nodded, hesitated, and then said: 'Let's keep the outlines clear, Bristow. Mannering was at Grey House, and forced an entry: Charge 1. Mannering went to Grant's Hatton Garden premises before Grant was killed. That's no ground for a charge yet, but it can be worked up. He broke into Penrose's house on Putney Hill, on Penrose's evidence, Mortimer's and Netley's: that's Charge 2. For the third he committed an act of violence on Penrose. Fourthly, he broke into the shop in Chelsea, this on Leonora Drake's evidence, and took the Durand

Collection from there. The fact that she says she doesn't know how they got there isn't important, they were taken, and there is evidence from Penrose and the two men who were caught with him that Mannering did break in and get away with the jewels. The premises belonged to Champbourcy, and there's no reason why the jewels should not have been there. It all stands up, and Mortimer supplies the evidence we've never had before – that the man was Mannering in every case. Mortimer and Netley together give unshakable evidence, Mannering can't evade it. We can believe, if we like, that Champbourcy was a party to the original theft, which is why the jewels were at Chelsea, but that doesn't affect Mannering. He's been caught at long last. That's nothing to regret.'

'No,' said Bristow, and more sharply: 'Of course not, sir.'

'Good,' Ffoulkes said. 'I know how you feel, but we've always known he would slip up. This he has now done, and we've got him. We're pleased about it.' His face was expressionless, and Bristow's matched it, although both started when the telephone rang.

Ffoulkes lifted the receiver and then listened for a few seconds. Saying sharply that he would be there, he rang off. He turned to Bristow. 'Mannering reached Mortimer's house in St. John's Wood at ten past nine. He's still there, and the house is watched back and front. Let's get there quickly.'

Chapter Twenty-Three

No Way Out?

Mortimer's eyes were heavy, there were deep lines about his full mouth. By the fireplace of the well-furnished lounge Netley moved restlessly, in a high pitch of nervous tension. From outside the rumble of traffic was unceasing, footsteps grew loud as people approached the window, faded when they passed.

Two men were standing on the sidewalk opposite.

Mannering could see them, had known that the house was watched when he had arrived, but made no attempt at evasion. The time was past for that, he could not keep free for long.

'You're wasting your time here, Mannering,' Mortimer said. 'It was senseless to come. If you realised what I'd done, why the hell didn't you cut and run for it?'

Mannering smiled at him.

It was his smile and his apparent nonchalance which affected Netley so badly and put Mortimer on edge.

'Let's say that I should hate to see you perjure yourself,' he said. 'You've time to withdraw your statement now, but it would be too late in court.' He paused, then added musingly: 'So you told Bristow that you recognised me at Grey House and at Putney. You didn't, of course. Why lie?'

'We did!' snapped Netley. 'There isn't any doubt about it, your voice is unmistakable even now. D'you think we're fools? You've just got time to get away. If you go now, you might be able to escape the country.'

'No,' said Mannering. 'Not these days. Unless, of course, you two know of a secret way out.' He paused.

'It doesn't concern us,' Mortimer said heavily.

'No-o? Lucille Durand knew of a way of getting to America and some kind soul told her he would get her a permit to leave

the country. Any ideas about that?' He was not smiling as he looked at Mortimer.

'You know damned well I haven't.'

'Ask her, ask her yourself,' flared Netley.

'Ye-es,' mused Mannering. 'I could. And I could cut and run with the police in full cry after me and a chance in ten thousand of getting out of the country. As a perfect confession of guilt, it would suit your book nicely. Mortimer and Netley high and dry, Mannering in deep waters. If I were the Baron, as you imagine, it might have had me scared. But as that legend's got to be worked out in court and the rumour scotched for good, I'd rather see it through. Your association with Penrose isn't favourable, but by lying hard you hope to get out of the worst of that.'

'It was all strictly legal!' Netley said shrilly. 'We had no idea that Penrose was a fence, we thought Leonora Drake genuinely wanted to sell diamonds, we didn't know they were stolen. You can't put anything on us, Mannering!'

'Oh, be quiet,' said Mannering, 'you're far too shrill for an innocent man. Mortimer, when I tell of Penrose's story that he saw you going into Grant's office by the back way, that won't sound too good.'

'It will only confuse the issues,' Mortimer said evenly. 'They can't prove it. The only thing that can be proved is that we saw you in two houses when you'd no right to be, and that you went to Hatton Garden.'

Mannering stifled a yawn. 'I think I can drive a coach and horses through the frame-up, but I may be wrong. What you mustn't forget, Mortimer, is that the gravest charge is Grant's murder, and the police will want more than questionable evidence that I was near the place. I'd assumed that he had been killed because he knew where to find the Durand Collection, but it's only half the story, the other's clearer now. He knew Leonora Drake, the genuine one, knew that although she was an actress in Paris she was also an agent for Penrose, probably sending him information about jewels stolen in France and coming on to the English market.'

‘Balderdash!’ shouted Netley.

Mortimer swore at him, then turned to Mannering. ‘Go on, I’m listening.’

Mannering was improvising swiftly, theories and ideas flowing fast. He could not be sure whether he would get the effect he wanted, could only fight hard. He knew that he was right in the main outlines, but could not be sure that he had the right man.

‘So she formed her friendship with Lucille Durand, to get information about the Collection, while maintaining a so-far-andno-further association with young Grant, whose father was a prospective buyer of gems. Grant père learned who had the Durand jewels, discovered also that his son was being used by Leonora. He also realised that his business friends were rogues. He might have kept quiet about the Leonora-Penrose business, because he had a loyalty to his friends, but he wasn’t going to keep silent with his son’s future involved. So Grant sent for you to tell you that he was through. Netley was late, but you got there early, Mortimer. You killed Grant because Grant was going to tell the whole story of your deals in smuggled jewels, of the fact that you’d stolen the Durand Collection. A comprehensive case, far stronger than any against me.’

Mortimer said uneasily: ‘It’s too weak to hold together.’

‘Oh no,’ said Mannering. ‘There was a record which Penrose kept, one you may not have known about. It tells the whole story of Penrose’s buying of his deals with you, his organisation with Baptiste and Garstang to get stuff into the country from France. It makes it clear that Leonora Drake was working on Grant so that Penrose and you could have a hold over the father. Thus Penrose could squeeze not only Grant père but you and Netley.’

‘It’s a lie!’ screeched Netley. ‘He wouldn’t be such a fool as to keep a record!’

Mortimer said: ‘How did you get that book if you weren’t at Putney?’

Mannering smiled. ‘Oh, I haven’t had it, I only know that it exists. Of course, it might not reach the police. For instance, if

you two forget your delusions about recognising me it might be sent to you.'

'There isn't such a book!' cried Netley. 'He's bluffing, he can't prove a thing!'

Mannering said: 'I can, Netley. Mortimer had the motive, Mortimer was at Grant's office, Mortimer killed him. When Penrose knows that book is in the possession of the police he'll know he's finished, he'll swear all the lies necessary to put the bigger crime on Mortimer and you, hoping that King's Evidence will help him. As for you, Netley, you'll almost certainly be brought in as an accessory. You had the same motives, the same reasons for wanting Grant dead.' He paused, then pulled himself to his feet. 'I think I've stayed long enough. I'd better be going.'

'You'll walk into the police,' said Mortimer.

'I'll walk away again,' smiled Mannering, but his inward tension was almost unbearable.

Mortimer said: 'Mannering, stay where you are! I wasn't at Grant's office, I didn't go there.'

Mannering shrugged: 'Too bad. Penrose had you watched and I followed his example.'

'Your evidence wouldn't be worth a damn!'

'Oh, it wasn't I who did the watching,' said Mannering. 'After you and Grant called at the flat I employed a private agency to follow both of you, and also to put a man on Netley. I can give the word for them to tell the police what they saw, but if you forget your idea that I was at Grey House and Putney—' He shrugged. 'I might forget to give instructions.' He looked at Netley, one eyebrow raised. 'You've always thought it was crazy, Netley, haven't you? You've always given that impression, Lucille Durand told me that you wanted to be through with it at Grey House, but Mortimer carried you along with him. The weaker the vessel the quicker the sinking.'

Netley took a quick step forward. 'Where's that book?'

'What book?' asked Mannering easily. 'The one Penrose wouldn't be such a fool as to keep?'

'I knew he had it all right, and you've got it! Hand it over!'

Netley pulled his hand from his pocket. An automatic

covered Mannering in a hand surprisingly steady. Netley's voice grew menacing, all appearance of nervous tension gone. 'Mannering, if you don't hand it over I'll kill you. I'll say that you became violent and were shot in a struggle. Mortimer will support that. You've just one chance of keeping alive. Give me that book.'

Mannering glanced quickly at Mortimer, and saw the man's heavy face set in unfeigned astonishment. Mannering kept quite still. Yet inwardly he was exultant. Mortimer or Netley, it did not matter which, had killed Grant. The motive in either case would be the same. Netley, of course! He had pretended to want to back out when they had first met, deceiving Mortimer and Grant as well as the Baron.

Netley said sharply: 'Mortimer, see if he's got the book in his pocket.'

Mortimer hesitated, then stepped slowly forward, looking bewildered, almost dazed. He put a hand inside Mannering's tunic and his fingers touched the stiff cover of Grant's book. He exclaimed aloud and drew it out. Netley drew closer, his eyes glittering at sight of the dark cover.

'That's it!' he said sharply.

Mannering moved his left fist then, driving a punch to Mortimer's chin and sending the man reeling backwards. Netley saw Mortimer falling and dodged to one side but could not altogether evade him. Mannering ducked and Netley's first bullet went wide, the second struck Mortimer in the shoulder.

In the general melée the automatic was jerked from Netley's grasp.

Mannering kicked the gun out of his reach, while from the other side of the road two men came running.

Mannering said tensely: 'Mortimer, Netley suggested that you lied about recognising me, didn't he?'

Mortimer said: 'Yes, he—'

'"Yes" is enough,' said Mannering. 'Netley suggested that a complete set of fakes of the Durand Collection was obtained, didn't he? Penrose obtained it and gave it to Netley?'

Mortimer said with an effort: 'Ye-es. But—'

The door opened abruptly. Behind the plain-clothes man who entered with a rush was Bristow, with Ffoulkes only a step behind.

Mannering turned to Bristow.

'Just the right moment, Bill. How glad I am to see you. Mortimer's just admitted that Netley suggested a false story about recognising me, that Netley had a complete set of the faked jewels, the ones, actually, that were found at my flat. Netley, I fancy, told Mortimer that I was the Baron, and that it would be a safe move to get you looking for me while they worked a different line. Right, Mortimer?'

Mortimer drew a deep breath.

'Are you suggesting that Netley killed Grant?'

'Of course he did. He went there after you'd gone, killed Grant, left the Tear to indicate a fake motive for the murder, then hurried out the back way and returned through the shop, to be the first to "discover" the dead man. He knew you had been there earlier, knew that through Penrose he could make a case against you if necessary.'

Mortimer looked at Netley, and said thinly: 'The treacherous swine! Yes, that's the truth, Bristow.' He drew a deep breath and added: 'I wanted a share of the Durand Collection and negotiated to get them, that's the extent of my part in this. Until this affair I've had no dealings with Penrose, it was Netley who knew him.' He paused, then added: 'Grant was a friend of mine, and a friend of Netley's.'

Netley said venomously: 'They're lying, Bristow. Trying to frame me, in order to get out of it themselves. The entries in that book are faked. I've never worked with Penrose, never in my life. Mortimer rigged the book, made a false diary. It's a frame-up, not a word of it's true.'

Bristow picked up the book and opened it. Ffoulkes looked at it over his shoulder.

Presently he said: 'Nothing's faked here, Netley.'

'It is! Every word of it! It says I've worked with Penrose, that I've helped in smuggling jewels and people into the country. Mortimer and Penrose always had that faked evidence prepared

and ready to frame me!'

Ffoulkes said abruptly: 'This book's quite empty, all the pages are clean. What made you think there might be such entries?'

Netley reared up, then swung round towards the window, striking at the plain-clothes man, kicking at Bristow as the Superintendent quickly overpowered him.

Netley screamed: 'Supposing I did kill him, he was going to betray me, we had a fight. I didn't intend to kill him, I wanted to make him see reason.'

He glared hot-eyed about the room, but made no further effort to struggle as the handcuffs closed about his wrists.

At Scotland Yard Mortimer was detained, but on no specific charge, while armed with his greater knowledge Bristow interviewed Leonora Drake again. He returned to Ffoulkes' office where Mannering was sitting at his ease.

'Well, Bristow?'

'She's cracked,' said Bristow with satisfaction. 'She worked as Mannering says, as Penrose's agent in Paris. Penrose and Netley stole the jewels from Champbourcy, but Netley still had to keep up a pretence of wanting them, in order to fool Mortimer and Grant. Before the jewels could be disposed of, the hue and cry had started. Penrose was operating the smuggling service, but sacrificed it as well as Baptiste and others for the sake of the jewels. Lucille Durand with her agile mind saw a chance of finding them by impersonating the Drake woman.'

Bristow laughed, then went on: 'Netley was planning to frame Mortimer and Grant, Grant discovered it, and found that his son was making a fool of himself with Leonora. Netley killed him, and Penrose knew it. None of them saw Mannering, as Mannering; Penrose jumped to conclusions because Mannering was the only man Lucille had confided in.'

'None of them saw me at all,' said Mannering amiably. 'And jumping to conclusions isn't convincing with a judge and jury. Just another little error, Bill. You will take these things too seriously. Where's Champbourcy, by the way?'

‘We’ll be releasing him when it’s all cleared up,’ Ffoulkes said. ‘He’s quite genuine, he came with Lucille just as he’s said in his revised story. Only fear of Baptiste and those working with Baptiste made him he in the first place – that and the fact that once the jewels were stolen he was afraid of risking internment. He and the girl kept the three Tears apart from the main Collection, to raise ready money. That’s why he came to you, he says. He doesn’t remember being told you are the Baron.’

‘Nice fellow,’ murmured Mannering.

‘He used to have a branch in Chelsea,’ Bristow said, ‘but sold it years ago to Netley, who ran it under the old business name.’

‘So problems fade,’ said Mannering, and laughed enough to make the others stare at him suspiciously.

‘If you’ve quite finished,’ said Ffoulkes, ‘perhaps you’ll tell us the name of the agency you employed to watch Netley?’

Mannering’s eyes widened.

‘David, you surprise me! Surely *you* recognise a fairy story when you’re told one? But it worked,’ he added, and heaved himself to his feet. ‘That’s an advantage of not being a policeman,’ he added smugly. ‘Either Mortimer or Netley was the man – I thought once that both were – and I had to make one of them crack. But it’s nearly twelve, I must go. I’ve an appointment at Caxton Hall for two o’clock, or didn’t you know? If either of you feel like being witnesses to the event, Lorna would be delighted.’

He was disappearing into a taxi when Tring hurried down the steps, calling: ‘Mr. Mannering, Mr. Mannering!’ He was breathless when he reached the cab, but gasped: ‘Just wanted to wish you the best of luck, and all that kind o’ thing.’

‘Tanker,’ said Mannering, shaking hands, ‘that’s gallant of you.’

‘Okay,’ said Tring, with a cackle of laughter. ‘I know we’ll ‘ave the two of you to ‘andle in future, so just you look out.’

Mannering chuckled, and the cabby drove away.

He sat back in the cab, his eyes closed, not opening them until the taxi pulled up outside Lorna’s house. He was paying

the man off when the front door opened and Lucille tore down the steps. Behind her was Charles Grant.

'John, John!' cried Lucille. 'The jewels, they have been found, the police have them and wish to see me. What shall I do? Will they intern me?' Half laughing, half crying, she gripped his hands.

'I doubt it,' said Mannering. 'They'll make you report once a day for a while, and tell you to be a better girl in future. Champbourcy won't be kept long either, or so I gathered.'

Grant said: 'I'll look after Lucille, John.' He gripped Mannering's hand. 'Everything all right?'

'Everything,' said Mannering emphatically, 'and no sting in the tail.'

But now his thoughts were only of Lorna. He found her in her boudoir, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

'John, nothing else can go wrong, can it? I—oh, darling, you must hurry, and I've hardly time to change!'

No time to reassure her, only to whirl her up in a bear-like hug.

Half an hour later, while he was getting into his own uniform, there was a rat-tat-tat on the door. A messenger boy delivered a small parcel into his hand.

Mannering did not recognise the writing on the label, and finished changing before he opened the packet. Then he stopped abruptly, seeing a tear-shaped diamond winking up at him.

It was the third Tear of Antoinette, and on a card was written: 'For everything, thank you. Lucille.' And on the reverse side: 'Tell me, please, do you think Charles a worthy man?'

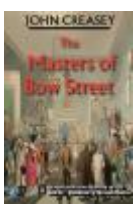
Series Information

Published or to be published by
House of Stratus

Dates given are those of first publication
Alternative titles in brackets

'The Baron' (47 titles) (writing as Anthony Morton)
'Department 'Z'' (28 titles)
'Dr. Palfrey Novels' (34 titles)
'Gideon of Scotland Yard' (22 titles)
'Inspector West' (43 titles)
'Sexton Blake' (5 titles)
'The Toff' (59 titles)

along with:



The Masters of Bow Street
This epic novel embraces the story of the Bow Street Runners and the Marine Police, forerunners of the modern police force, who were founded by novelist Henry Fielding in 1748. They were the earliest detective force operating from the courts to enforce the decisions of magistrates. John Creasey's account also gives a fascinating insight into family life of the time and the struggle between crime and justice, and ends with the establishment of the Metropolitan Police after the passing of Peel's Act in 1829.

‘The Baron’ Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Meet the Baron *(The Man in the Blue Mask) (1937)*
2. The Baron Returns *(The Return of the Blue Mask) (1937)*
3. The Baron Again *(Salute Blue Mask) (1938)*
4. The Baron at Bay *(Blue Mask at Bay) (1938)*
5. Alias the Baron *(Alias Blue Mask) (1939)*
6. The Baron at Large *(Challenge Blue Mask!) (1939)*
7. Versus the Baron *(Blue Mask Strikes Again) (1940)*
8. Call for the Baron *(Blue Mask Victorious) (1940)*
9. The Baron Comes Back *(1943)*
10. A Case for the Baron *(1945)*
11. Reward for the Baron *(1945)*
12. Career for the Baron *(1946)*
13. Blood Diamond *(The Baron and the Beggar) (1947)*
14. Blame the Baron *(1948)*
15. A Rope for the Baron *(1948)*
16. Books for the Baron *(1949)*
17. Cry for the Baron *(1950)*
18. Trap the Baron *(1950)*
19. Attack the Baron *(1951)*
20. Shadow the Baron *(1951)*
21. Warn the Baron *(1952)*
22. The Baron Goes East *(1953)*
23. The Baron in France *(1953)*
24. Danger for the Baron *(1953)*
25. The Baron Goes Fast *(1954)*
26. Nest-Egg for the Baron *(Deaf, Dumb and Blonde) (1954)*
27. Help from the Baron *(1955)*
28. Hide the Baron *(1956)*
29. The Double Frame *(Frame the Baron) (1957)*
30. Blood Red *(Red Eye for the Baron) (1958)*
31. If Anything Happens to Hester *(Black for the Baron) (1959)*
32. Salute for the Baron *(1960)*
33. The Baron Branches Out *(A Branch for the Baron) (1961)*
34. The Baron and the Stolen Legacy *(Bad for the Baron) (1962)*
35. A Sword for the Baron *(The Baron and the Mogul Swords) (1963)*
36. The Baron on Board *(The Mask of Sumi) (1964)*
37. The Baron and the Chinese Puzzle *(1964)*
38. Sport for the Baron *(1966)*
39. Affair for the Baron *(1967)*

40. The Baron and the Missing Old Masters *(1968)*
41. The Baron and the Unfinished Portrait *(1969)*
42. Last Laugh for the Baron *(1970)*
43. The Baron Goes A-Buying *(1971)*
44. The Baron and the Arrogant Artist *(1972)*
45. Burgle the Baron *(1973)*
46. The Baron - King Maker *(1975)*
47. Love for the Baron *(1979)*

Doctor Palfrey Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Traitor's Doom *(1942)*
2. The Legion of the Lost *(1943)*
3. The Valley of Fear *(The Perilous Country) (1943)*
4. Dangerous Quest *(1944)*
5. Death in the Rising Sun *(1945)*
6. The Hounds of Vengeance *(1945)*
7. Shadow of Doom *(1946)*
8. The House of the Bears *(1946)*
9. Dark Harvest *(1947)*
10. The Wings of Peace *(1948)*
11. The Sons of Satan *(1948)*
12. The Dawn of Darkness *(1949)*
13. The League of Light *(1949)*
14. The Man Who Shook the World *(1950)*
15. The Prophet of Fire *(1951)*
16. The Children of Hate *(The Killers of Innocence; The Children of Despair) (1952)*
17. The Touch of Death *(1954)*
18. The Mists of Fear *(1955)*
19. The Flood *(1956)*
20. The Plague of Silence *(1958)*
21. Dry Spell *(The Drought) (1959)*
22. The Terror *(1962)*
23. The Depths *(1963)*
24. The Sleep *(1964)*
25. The Inferno *(1965)*
26. The Famine *(1967)*
27. The Blight *(1968)*
28. The Oasis *(1970)*
29. The Smog *(1970)*
30. The Unbegotten *(1971)*
31. The Insulators *(1972)*
32. The Voiceless Ones *(1973)*
33. The Thunder-Maker *(1976)*
34. The Whirlwind *(1979)*

Gideon Series

(Writing as JJ Marric)

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Gideon's Day *(Gideon of Scotland Yard) (1955)*
2. Seven Days to Death *(Gideon's Week) (1956)*
3. Gideon's Night *(1957)*
4. A Backwards Jump *(Gideon's Month) (1958)*
5. Thugs and Economies *(Gideon's Staff) (1959)*
6. Gideon Combats Influence *(Gideon's Risk) (1960)*
7. Gideon's Fire *(1961)*
8. A Conference for Assassins *(Gideon's March) (1962)*
9. Travelling Crimes *(Gideon's Ride) (1963)*
10. An Uncivilised Election *(Gideon's Vote) (1964)*
11. Criminal Imports *(Gideon's Lot) (1965)*
12. To Nail a Serial Killer *(Gideon's Badge) (1966)*
13. From Murder to a Cathedral *(Gideon's Wrath) (1967)*
14. Gideon's River *(1968)*
15. Darkness and Confusion *(Gideon's Power) (1969)*
16. Sport, Heat & Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Sport) (1970)*
17. Gideon's Art *(1971)*
18. No Relaxation at Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Men) (1972)*
19. Impartiality Against the Mob *(Gideon's Press) (1973)*
20. Not Hidden by the Fog *(Gideon's Fog) (1975)*
21. Good and Justice *(Gideon's Drive) (1976)*
22. Vigilantes & Biscuits *(Gideon's Force) (1978)*

Inspector West Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Inspector West Takes Charge *(1942)*
2. Go Away to Murder *(Inspector West Leaves Town) (1943)*
3. An Apostle of Gloom *(Inspector West At Home) (1944)*
4. Inspector West Regrets *(1945)*
5. Holiday for Inspector West *(1946)*
6. Battle for Inspector West *(1948)*
7. The Case Against Paul Raeburn *(Triumph for Inspector West) (1948)*
8. Inspector West Kicks Off *(Sport for Inspector West) (1949)*
9. Inspector West Alone *(1950)*
10. Inspector West Cries Wolf *(The Creepers) (1950)*
11. The Figure in the Dusk *(A Case for Inspector West) (1951)*
12. The Dissemblers *(Puzzle for Inspector West) (1951)*
13. The Case of the Acid Throwers *(The Blind Spot; Inspector West at Bay) (1952)*
14. Give a Man a Gun *(A Gun for Inspector West) (1953)*
15. Send Inspector West *(1953)*
16. So Young, So Cold, So Fair *(A Beauty for Inspector West; The Beauty Queen Killer) (1954)*
17. Murder Makes Haste *(Inspector West Makes Haste; The Gelignite Gang; Night of the Watchman) (1955)*
18. Murder: One, Two, Three *(Two for Inspector West) (1955)*
19. Death of a Postman *(Parcels for Inspector West) (1956)*
20. Death of an Assassin *(A Prince for Inspector West) (1956)*
21. Hit and Run *(Accident for Inspector West) (1957)*
22. The Trouble at Saxby's *(Find Inspector West; Doorway to Death) (1957)*
23. Murder, London - New York *(1958)*
24. Strike for Death *(The Killing Strike) (1958)*
25. Death of a Racehorse *(1959)*
26. The Case of the Innocent Victims *(1959)*
27. Murder on the Line *(1960)*
28. Death in Cold Print *(1961)*
29. The Scene of the Crime *(1961)*
30. Policeman's Dread *(1962)*
31. Hang the Little Man *(1963)*
32. Look Three Ways at Murder *(1964)*
33. Murder, London - Australia *(1965)*
34. Murder, London - South Africa *(1966)*
35. The Executioners *(1967)*

36. So Young to Burn *(1968)*
37. Murder, London - Miami *(1969)*
38. A Part for a Policeman *(1970)*
39. Alibi for Inspector West *(1971)*
40. A Splinter of Glass *(1972)*
41. The Theft of Magna Carta *(1973)*
42. The Extortioners *(1974)*
43. A Sharp Rise in Crime *(1978)*

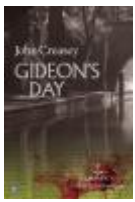
‘The Toff’ Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Introducing the Toff *(It’s the Toff!) (1938)*
2. The Toff Goes On *(1939)*
3. The Toff Steps Out *(1939)*
4. Here Comes the Toff *(1940)*
5. The Toff Breaks In *(1940)*
6. Salute the Toff *(1941)*
7. The Toff Proceeds *(1941)*
8. The Toff Goes to Market *(1942)*
9. The Toff Is Back *(1942)*
10. The Toff on the Trail *(short stories) (1942)*
11. The Toff among the Millions *(1943)*
12. Accuse the Toff *(1943)*
13. The Toff and the Deadly Priest *(The Toff and the Curate) (1944)*
14. The Toff and the Great Illusion *(1944)*
15. Feathers for the Toff *(1945)*
16. The Toff and the Lady *(1946)*
17. Poison for the Toff *(The Toff on Ice) (1946)*
18. Hammer the Toff *(1947)*
19. The Toff in Town *(1948)*
20. The Toff Takes Shares *(1948)*
21. The Toff and Old Harry *(1949)*
22. The Toff on Board *(1949)*
23. Fool the Toff *(1950)*
24. Kill the Toff *(1950)*
25. A Knife for the Toff *(1951)*
26. A Mask for the Toff *(The Toff Goes Gay) (1951)*
27. Hunt the Toff *(1952)*
28. Call the Toff *(1953)*
29. The Toff Down Under *(Break the Toff) (1953)*
30. Murder Out of the Past *(short stories) (1953)*
31. The Toff at Camp *(The Toff at Butlins) (1954)*
32. The Toff at the Fair *(1954)*
33. A Six for the Toff *(A Score for the Toff) (1955)*
34. The Toff and the Deep Blue Sea *(1955)*
35. Kiss the Toff *(Make-Up for the Toff) (1956)*
36. The Toff in New York *(1956)*
37. Model for the Toff *(1957)*
38. The Toff on Fire *(1957)*
39. The Toff and the Stolen Tresses *(1958)*

40. Terror for the Toff *(The Toff on the Farm) (1958)*
41. Double for the Toff *(1959)*
42. The Toff and the Runaway Bride *(1959)*
43. A Rocket for the Toff *(1960)*
44. The Toff and the Kidnapped *(The Kidnapped Child) (1960)*
45. Follow the Toff *(1961)*
46. The Toff and the Toughs *(The Toff and the Teds) (1961)*
47. A Doll for the Toff *(1963)*
48. Leave It to the Toff *(1963)*
49. The Toff and the Spider *(1965)*
50. The Toff in Wax *(1966)*
51. A Bundle for the Toff *(1967)*
52. Stars for the Toff *(1968)*
53. The Toff and the Golden Boy *(1969)*
54. The Toff and the Fallen Angels *(1970)*
55. Vote for the Toff *(1971)*
56. The Toff and the Trip-Trip-Triplets *(1972)*
57. The Toff and the Terrified Taxman *(1973)*
58. The Toff and the Sleepy Cowboy *(1975)*
59. The Toff and the Crooked Copper *(1977)*

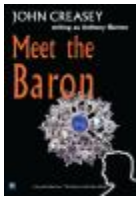
Select Synopses



Gideon's Day
Gideon's day is a busy one. He balances family commitments with solving a series of seemingly unrelated crimes from which a plot nonetheless evolves and a mystery is solved. One of the most senior officers within Scotland Yard, George Gideon's crime solving abilities are in the finest traditions of London's world famous police headquarters. His analytical brain and sense of fairness is respected by colleagues and villains alike.

Gideon's Night
On this particular night Commander George Gideon has to deal with a couple of psychopaths who trail pain and blood in their wake. One targets infants, and the other young women on London's foggy streets. There's also an explosive gang war in the offing, and one way or another all of these cases are coming to their breathtaking conclusions at the same time. Can Scotland Yard's finest cope with such a nightmarish scenario, with what would ordinarily be months of time consuming police work crammed into just one night?

Gideon's Fire
Commander George Gideon of Scotland Yard has to deal successively with news of a mass murderer, a depraved maniac, and the deaths of a family in an arson attack on an old building south of the river. This leaves little time for the crisis developing at home …



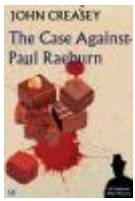
Meet the Baron
John Mannering (*The Baron*) makes his first appearance in this volume. Lord Fauntley cannot help showing off both his daughter and the security under which his precious jewels are kept. Mannering finds himself attracted to both.… Money is tight and so he plans a burglary, but this fails and unexpected consequnces result. The relationship with Lorna Fauntley flourishes, and a series of high profile thefts and adventures ensure Mannering's future, so he believes, until Lorna equates him with *The Baron*. One of the many further twists in this award winning novel occurs when the police appear to seek Mannering's help, only to have everything turned upside down as the plot develops …

Shadow The Baron
John Mannering ('*The Baron*') is called in by Scotland Yard's Superintendent Bristow to help catch the mysterious jewel thief '*The Shadow*'. No one know the thief's identity, but he has managed to pull off many high profile robberies. However, as Mannering proceeds to track down the target, he finds the pursuer becomes the pursued. …

The House of the Bears
Standing alone in the bleak Yorkshire Moors is Sir Rufus Marne's *'House of the Bears'*. Dr. Palfrey is asked to journey there to examine an invalid - whom he finds has disappeared. Moreover, Marne's daughter lies terribly injured after a fall from the minstrel's gallery, which Dr. Palfrey discovers was no accident. He sets out to look into both matters, but the discoveries he makes are truly fantastic. A deserted mine, powerful explosive and a submarine all feature

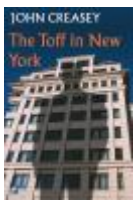
in this powerful mystery. The results are even capable of surprising him …

Inspector West Takes Charge
Extortion is the name of the game, as one victim after another is ruthlessly targeted. Chief Inspector Roger West must now solve the problem, along with a tangle of murders - but the case becomes more frightening as every minute passes.



The Case Against Paul Raeburn
Chief Inspector Roger West has been watching and waiting for over two years - he is determined to catch Paul Raeburn out. The millionaire racketeer may have made a mistake, following the killing of a small time crook. Can the ace detective triumph over the evil Raeburn in what are very difficult circumstances? This cannot be assumed as not eveything, it would seem, is as simple as it first appears.....

Introducing The Toff
The Toff is the Hon. Richard Rollison; the ultimate sleuth who revels in solving crimes. Whilst returning home across the Essex countryside from a day's cricket at his father's Norfolk home, he happens upon an accident that sets him on a new trail. This involves murder, suspense and thrilling action as The Toff applies his mind with its usual precision and thoroughness.



The Toff in New York
'Say, Miss Hall, I hope that brother of yours hasn't run into any trouble.' But Will Hall had been kidnapped and the Honourable Richard Rollison, known by many by the apt if absurd soubriquet of the *'Toff'* is soon on the scene, but not before a murdered man had fallen into Valerie Hallís arms.

There's lots of action in 'millionaire surroundings', with a rich private eye and the NYPD all on the case, whilst the Toff tracks Dutch Himmy, surely the worst man in New York.....

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